

Nutrition-centered day care helps shape kids' habits ^[1]

Author: Anderson, Cheryl

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EXCERPTS:

Two-year-old Wesley Huisman doesn't care where his lunch comes from when he's hungry. He just wants to eat.

But with about three-fourths of children ages 2 to 6 in the United States spending large parts of each day in day care, what young children eat while mom and dad are away should be a big deal to their parents.

It certainly is to Huisman's mother, Kristi Hill, who has brought the toddler to Amy & Kids Co. Family Child Care in Appleton, Wis., since he was 12 weeks old.

"We were very pleased to find that Amy focuses on organic and healthy foods," said Hill, who feeds her son those same foods at home.

A study of child care programs in Wisconsin and Minnesota recently found that many children learn food and nutrition attitudes and preferences in child care. Good habits, they discovered, start early.

"The schools have to start out with one hand tied behind their backs when a child starts school already thinking that Pop Tarts are breakfast and that pop is what you drink at lunch," said Susan Nitzke, cooperative extension nutrition specialist and professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin.

Nitzke and colleague Dave Riley, an expert on child development and early education for Cooperative Extension and a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, wrote *Rethinking Nutrition: Connecting Science and Practice in Early Childhood Settings*.

The book combines the science of childhood nutrition and the practices of good child-care programs that affect a child's nutrition and development.

Nearly a quarter of U.S. children between the ages of 2 and 5 are overweight or obese. The rate is 17% for all children and adolescents in the country - triple the rate from one generation ago, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Federal help

Nutrition is a big piece of the pie at Faith Child Care. The nondenominational Christian center, which has been operating for 23 years, averages about 67 children ages 6 weeks to 11 in the summer.

Kids are served breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack as part of the Children and Adult Care Food Program, a federal program that provides more than 3.2 million children and 112,000 adults with nutritious meals and snacks each day and reimburses participating day care centers for meal costs. Most child care providers in the country are part of this program.

"We get audited every couple years," said Faith Child Care's administrative director, Sandy Amundson. "And at the end of each month, they look at our menus. We need to track point of service where every classroom that serves meals has to count the number of children that are there for that particular meal."

Faith Child Care offers fresh fruit and vegetables, and whole grain and whole wheat products. It tries to steer clear of processed foods.

The center's staff implemented Tasty Tuesdays to introduce healthier foods - such as hummus and yogurt-type dips - to children. Older kids tend a garden, where they grow cucumbers, cherry tomatoes and other veggies.

Amy Nogar, who has operated Amy & Kids Co. Family Child Care from her Appleton home since October 1999, cares for seven children ages newborn to 5, including Huisman.

She offers a mix of fresh foods and organic items, when she can, and determines the child care center's menu based on what's nutritious.

"For me, we're (also) trying to do more with our family nutrition so it's important that I incorporate that also in the day care," Nogar said. "We're going with whole grains. We're trying to avoid high-fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated fats. And serve a lot of veggies."

Huisman's mother says her son is a healthier child because of the food he consumes at Amy & Kids, and the entire family pays more attention to nutrition because of Nogar's efforts.

"Since going to Amy we're even healthier because she's introducing foods that my husband and I have gotten in the habit of not serving," Hill said.

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