

## 4 Early childhood services

### Long day care and family day care centres

Thousands of parents in Victoria entrust the care of their infants and preschool children to carers who operate from their own homes or from commercial premises. These carers experience the concerns of parents and, unlike many other practitioners, usually feed the children. Given the early establishment of food and taste preferences (Temple et al. 2002), more evaluated healthy eating (and activity) initiatives need to be undertaken with preschool children.

Long day care involves both private and community run centres. Family day care is usually provided for small groups of children by carers in their own homes. Children are usually fed in both long day care and family day care, so there are major opportunities (both at the centres and via the parents) to shape and reinforce the development of healthy eating habits.

Recently, Montague (2004) reviewed the opportunities and barriers in these settings to promote healthy eating and physical activity. The review showed that workers in these centres are often keen to teach the principles of healthy eating to children and their parents. Prior to Montague's report, the Department of Human Services Victoria adopted the Western Australian Start Right, Eat Right program and is piloting the program in Victorian long day care. This program offers basic nutrition and healthy eating training for carers, which enables them to provide parents with practical behavioural and nutritional advice about feeding children, as well as healthier food choices in the centres (Pollard, Miller and Lewis 2001). The program has been in operation in Western Australia for several years, and has been widely adopted by most of the state's family day care centres. Anecdotal observation suggests the role of carers as healthy eating advisors has been strengthened in Western Australia (J Lewis, pers. comm., 2002).

The Start Right, Eat Right program involves:

- the training of preschool long day care staff in nutrition and child feeding principles, along with menu that includes whole foods and discourages highly processed foods (Pollard, Miller and Lewis 2001)
- newspaper advertising of preschools that have nutritionally trained staff, so parents can choose to send their children to preschools that serve healthier foods (Pollard, Miller and Lewis 2001).

**Preschools**

Preschools and kindergartens target 3 and 4 year olds. Some of the education provided involves socialisation and education about food and eating, so these centres offer important opportunities to influence children's food learning and eating practices. *Food facts for preschoolers* is a useful education guide produced by the Kindergarten Parents Victoria ([www.kpu.org.au](http://www.kpu.org.au)).