CASE STUDY

Creating lasting change through a Sustainable Food Awareness Week

SERVICE	Goodstart Endeavour Hills
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, not-for-profit
AGE RANGE	6 weeks to 6 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	73
NUMBER OF STAFF	17
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Endeavour Hills, VIC



Background

Goodstart Endeavour Hills participated in a study involving the Deakin University and National Nutrition Foundation's "Sustainable and Nutritious Food Environments in Early Childhood Education and Care: a Toolkit".[34] The toolkit was co-designed with the Victorian ECEC sector and informed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) "Sustainable Healthy Diets Guiding Principles". The toolkit provides practical tips, strategies and links to resources to support services in adapting their everyday practices in line with the guiding principles. Services selected the sustainability practices they wished to implement during a Sustainable Food Awareness Week.

What did you want to do?

The service wanted to focus on two components within the Toolkit:

- Plant-based foods such as fruit and vegetables
- Food waste

As outlined by the Toolkit, they wanted to follow a whole-of-service approach and involve the broader community, such as families and representatives from local schools.

What support did you have?

Support included:

- The Toolkit resource that was sent to them.
- Online access to the "Achievement Program" resources to guide the appropriate amounts of food to serve to children.

What did you do?

Creating a shared vision

The service:

- Worked with staff and children to develop a shared vision for Sustainable Food Awareness Week.
- Coordinated communication with families.

Changes in the kitchen, food provision and waste management

- The service prepared meals using the menu planning guidance amounts but began by serving food in smaller serving bowls.
  - The first serving bowl contained an amount based on staff observations of how much children typically ate and was provided for children to self-serve.
  - A second serving bowl was kept covered and maintained in accordance with food safety and hygiene requirements and made available for children who wanted second helpings.
  - Any remaining food could then be offered to staff, or families who needed an extra meal. In particular, when a family was going through a difficult time or had a sick child at home, leftover food that had been stored and handled in accordance with food safety and hygiene requirements was offered to the family.
- Morning tea and afternoon tea offerings focused on plant-based foods, including a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Mealtime practices supporting child autonomy

- Educators encouraged children to serve themselves an amount they felt they would eat, reassuring them that they could always return for second or third helpings if they were still hungry.
  - Educators checked in with children throughout the meal to support them in recognising their hunger and 'had enough' cues.
- Children were involved in preparing morning and afternoon tea by cutting fruit and vegetables.
- Educators encouraged conversations about the colours, textures and characteristics of the foods being prepared.
- Children were able to self-serve their fruit and vegetables at morning tea and afternoon tea, with additional servings kept covered and available for a period of time in accordance with food safety and hygiene practices.

Child agency and family involvement – meals provided

During the Sustainable Food Awareness Week:

- The service displayed the daily menu alongside pictures of the ingredients and a QR code linking to the recipe.
- Children were invited to add stickers to indicate whether they enjoyed the meal, providing valuable feedback to the cook.
- Families could access the recipes to prepare the meals at home, helping to extend children's food experiences beyond the service.

Food education and mealtime conversations

- Children were engaged in learning about plant-based foods such as fruit and vegetables and where they come from through:
  - Hands-on educational experiences.
  - Conversations while preparing and exploring fruits and vegetables.
- Children were also involved in measuring the amount of plate waste (food scraps) and discussing ways to reduce it.
  - In addition, they removed citrus from food scraps to be able to add the food scraps to the worm farm.
- Through mealtime conversations and the mealtime practices implemented during Sustainable Food Awareness Week:
  - Children recognised that taking only what they needed helped to reduce food waste.
  - Many children expressed pride in listening to their hunger and 'had enough' cues while being mindful of food waste.

Sustainability practices embedded into the information evening

The service's information evening was attended by families and representatives from local schools. During the evening the service:

- Shared information about Sustainable Food Awareness Week.
- Discussed the sustainable food practices they had implemented.
- Shared the Toolkit that supported Sustainable Food Awareness Week.

Families and community members responded positively to the information shared and the service's commitment to sustainability.

Beyond Sustainable Food Awareness Week, which practices became embedded into daily practice?

- Smaller initial servings with opportunities for additional helpings became embedded into mealtime practices.
- Safe management and repurposing of leftover food became part of everyday operations.
- Reduced food waste practices were maintained.
- Child agency in deciding how much to eat and responding to hunger and 'had enough' cues remained a key mealtime practice.
- Food education and sustainability-focused learning experiences continued to be embedded within the curriculum.

The difference it has made

- By improving their food provision and food waste practices, they were able to manage the service's food budget without compromising food quality.
- Food waste was reduced at both the serving and plate waste levels.
- Children developed a greater awareness of environmental sustainability of food, including the importance of reducing and managing food waste.

Top tips

- Start with a shared vision and involve children, educators and cooks from the beginning.
- Focus on being gentle and kind to the environment through everyday sustainable food practices.
- Honour and encourage children's agency and decision-making throughout the process.
- When making changes to sustainability practices, an intensive Awareness Week can be a powerful catalyst for lasting change.
- Small, low-cost changes to everyday practices can make a big difference to sustainability outcomes, including reducing food waste and supporting food budgets.