



Food service in NSW childcare centres

Preliminary evaluation findings

September 2008



What's been happening and where are we at?

The national standard requiring businesses preparing or serving food to vulnerable persons to comply with Standard 3.2.1 (FSC 3.2.1) was gazetted in 2006. As a consequence, the NSW Food Authority (the Authority) is now considering options for implementing the Standard in the NSW children's services sector. The start date for the standard (in NSW childcare centres) has not yet been set.

In August 2008 the Authority completed the first phase of a benchmark evaluation study of the NSW children's services sector. This involved a self assessment questionnaire being sent to 2484 licensed childcare centres¹ in NSW. A total of 735 responses were received which is about a 30% response rate. This included centres advising via email or phone that they do not provide food as part of their service.

The objectives of the evaluation study were:

- **to collect information for the cost benefit analysis** for the introduction of the national Standard 3.3.1 in childcare centres,
- **to construct a profile of children's services businesses in NSW** (number, types of food served), and
- **to assess industry preparedness for mandatory, audited food safety programs** (FSC 3.2.1).

The purpose of this report is to communicate the results of the evaluation survey to childcare centres in NSW.

¹ From the Lady Gowrie database (January 2008) which lists 2961 licensed childcare centres. Preschool education conducted by a schools is not subject to Standard 3.3.1 and was excluded from the study

Evaluation results

Profile of childcare centres in NSW

Results indicate 86% of childcare centres² and 10% of pre-schools³ serve potentially hazardous food as part of the service. Food that is supplied by parents is excluded. Of a possible 2066 childcare centres and 794 preschools, it is therefore estimated that 1777 childcare centres and 79 preschools will be subject to Standard 3.3.1. (n=469 childcare total responses, n=141 pre-school total responses).

On average, each centre offers 43 childcare places per day. Survey respondents indicated that the total number of childcare places per day was 16,651 (n= total responses 385). The average number of places per day was then calculated to be 43.

Nine out of ten centres serve morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea. Centres were asked to indicate at which of the meal occasions they served food (Table 1). This might or might not have included potentially hazardous food. It is estimated that the survey respondents (n= total response 418) serve a total of 1457 meals every day.

Table 1: Numbers of meal occasions provided in NSW

Meal occasion	% of centres
Breakfast	41% (n =173)
Morning tea	94% (n = 394)
Lunch	90% (n=378)
Afternoon tea	95% (n=397)
Dinner	4% (n=15)
Late snack	24% (n=100)

Only 28% of centres have received a routine food hygiene inspection in the past twelve months by local councils (n= total responses 325).

Approximately one third of centres purchase and serve pre-sliced deli meats such as ham and chicken loaf (n= total responses 401).

Bought, pre-made salads and fruit salads are rarely on the menu. Fourteen centres (3.5%) indicated that they bought pre-made fresh cut salads and six centres (1%) indicated they purchased and served pre-prepared fresh cut fruit salads (n= total responses 401).

Approximately 90% of centres make and serve hot, freshly cooked food. Table 2 lists the types of food processing activities occurring in childcare centres. This information indicates the extent to which centres are undertaking food preparation activities which require increased food safety controls.

Table 2: Food preparation profile

Processing activities	% of centres	Total No. of responses
Cut up fresh fruit and vegetables	98% (n=399)	408
Cook fresh (hot food made and served that day)	90% (n=366)	407
Pureed food	69% (n=280)	408
Cook chill (hot food that was cooked and chilled)	37% (n=147)	399
Infant formula (excluding formula prepared by parents)	28% (n=110)	394

² This includes; long day care, work institution day care, stand alone occasional care and multipurpose centres.

³ NSW licensed preschools, excludes Department of Education and Training Centres

Approximately 44% of centres serve food containing raw eggs such as mayonnaise, mousse and custards. A profile of certain foods served in centres is presented in Table 3. These foods are included for a number of reasons:

- They are considered high risk due to raw ingredients (mayonnaise, mousse etc)
- Are inappropriate for babies (honey)
- Have been linked to past foodborne illness outbreaks (pikelets and perishable foods packed for excursions)

Table 3: Profile of food made and served in childcare centres

Food types	% of centres	Total No of responses
Pikelets	75% (n=301)	406
Cold foods containing raw eggs eg mayonnaise, mousse, custards	44% (n=179)	403
Perishable foods packed for class excursions	20% (n=81)	404
Honey to children under 1 year old	3% (n=14)	406

Is the industry ready for mandatory audited food safety programs?

The NSW children's services sector has introduced voluntary food safety programs but external audits are the next step.

Of the centres that serve potentially hazardous food 78% said they had implemented food safety programs (n=311). However, **only 20% of food safety programs (n=65) had been subjected to a food safety audit conducted by an external party.** This excludes the accreditation audit by the National Childcare Accreditation Centre (NCAC).

The majority of centres (91%) agree food safety programs should be a priority for the children's services sector (n= total respondents 351). The few centres that did not think food safety programs should be a priority for the sector gave the following reasons:

- There are no food safety problems in their centre, staff are well trained (n=5)
- Food safety programs are already required and these are monitored by councils and accreditation bodies (n=5)
- There are already many other important priorities and food safety is no more important than other issues (n=2)
- The children's services sector already has many requirements placed upon it (n=2)

Food safety programs with regulatory support rated the most effective regulatory option compared to food safety programs with no support (go it alone option) and food safety programs with industry association support only. Seventy-four per cent of respondents ranked food safety programs with regulatory support as the most effective option, whereas 25% ranked food safety programs with industry association support as the most effective implementation option. Only 1% ranked unsupported food safety programs as the most effective option.

More rigorous food safety procedures are considered the most likely consequence of a foodborne disease outbreak. Centres were asked to indicate which outcomes they believed would be the consequences of a foodborne illness outbreak at their centre. These are listed in Table 4. Fifty per cent indicated they believed an outbreak would result in more rigorous food safety procedures closely followed by an increase in staff and management stress levels (41%).

Table 4: Selected consequences of a foodborne illness outbreak

Consequence of foodborne illness	% of centres	Total no. responses
Implementation of more rigorous food safety procedures	50% (n=291)	587
Increase in staff/management stress level	41% (n =243)	588
Reduced patronage	31% (n=183)	590
Legal action	24% (n=140)	589
Reduced income	24% (n=138)	584
Increase in insurance premium	13% (n=79)	587

The majority of centres (81%) believe that the implementation of food safety programs would result in improved food safety outcomes. Other perceived benefits include:

- Training benefits and increased competency of staff (79%)
- Improved relationships with food regulators (56%)
- Improved defence against legal action (51%)
- Improved public client relationship (51%)

Centres (95%) want the Authority's help with food safety programs (n= total responses 360). Types of assistance from the Authority requested by respondents are listed in Table 5.

Table 5: Type of assistance requested

Assistance	Proportion of centres
Fact sheets	94% (n=322)
Food safety program template	90% (n=307)
Newsletters	86% (n=295)
Audit guidelines	64% (n=220)
Phone helpline	45% (n= 156)
Presentations / road shows	36% (n=123)
Industry consultation forum	27% (n=92)

More than 50% of centres indicated they do not receive food safety information (n=total responses 359). Of those that did receive food safety information the most common source was the NSW Department of Health. Other sources are listed in Table 6.

Table 6: Summary of food safety information sources

Source	Proportion of all centres responding (n=102)
NSW Health Department or AHS	33% (n=33)
National Childcare Accreditation Council	20% (n=20)
Local council	16% (n=16)
Nutrition Australia	11% (n=11)
NSW Food Authority	7% (n=7)
FSANZ	3% (n=3)
Childcare NSW	3% (n=3)

Responses to open ended questions offer important insights into the childcare sector

There were three strong themes running through all open ended responses. These were:

- A strong food safety culture is evident in the childcare industry
- Centres request simple and straightforward regulatory support
- Centres are interested in, and want to be involved with, the regulatory process

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the first phase of the *Children's Services Benchmark Evaluation*, a number of recommendations have been developed.

They include:

- Providing food safety information to centres alongside feedback on the survey, such as the dangers of serving raw egg dishes, serving honey to babies, and how to safely make pikelets
- Raising the Food Authority's profile as a trusted source of food safety information by including information for childcare centres on the Authority's website, in the Authority's quarterly industry newsletter *Foodwise* and in industry association newsletters

What's next?

The Authority is planning an on-site survey in the first half of 2009.

Any questions regarding this report please contact the Authority's Consumer & Industry Helpline on 1300 552 406

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