



CREATING A HEALTHIER EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICE

BY EMMA BRUCE

Healthy children learn better. By promoting healthy behaviors, you can give children a great start to their learning and development.

Poor health is a problem across the State. Approximately one quarter of children in Victoria are overweight or obese and just 12 per cent consume enough vegetables.

Excursion locations have included a lighthouse, beach and a market, where the children purchased fresh fruit to enjoy. “Their learning started at the front door, crossing the road and catching the bus with members of the community,” Maree said.

The Victorian Government’s Healthy Together Achievement Program gives early childhood services a framework, tools and resources to create a healthier physical and social environment.

Achievement Program Manager Anthony Bernardi said that creating a healthy environment in your early childhood service can help children learn, play and reach their full potential.

“Playing and learning in a healthy social and physical environment can have a huge impact on a young person’s wellbeing,” Anthony said.

Ada Mary A’Beckett Children’s Centre in Port Melbourne is using the Achievement Program framework to make improvements in healthy eating and oral health, physical activity, sun protection and safe environments.

Centre Manager Maree Leslie said the framework has helped them identify and focus on areas of need.

Healthy eating was one of the first priorities identified. In an effort to offer children the best options, the Centre submitted the Centre’s menu to the Healthy Eating Advisory Service (HEAS) for assessment, to see how close it was to meeting Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Maree said the assessment gave them lots of new ideas, particularly for increasing the nutritional content of morning and afternoon teas.

“We got rid of some foods and increased others. It was about finding the right balance,” Maree explained.

The Centre has a new focus on excursions and active travel as part of their initiatives to improve physical activity.

“We did a lot of walking in the community in 2015 and it’s a focus again for us this year,” she said.

Excursion locations have included a lighthouse, beach and a market, where the children purchased fresh fruit to enjoy.

It’s an exercise which has exposed the children to multiple learning opportunities. “Their learning started at the front door, crossing the road and catching the bus with members of the community,” Maree said.

“It helps them make connections in the community. A lot of the children live in the area and were able to identify locations and make connections with community members. It’s important that we embed safe messages for children.”

The lessons have been enthusiastically embraced by both children and families at the Centre.

The changes have not been implemented by Maree alone. The Achievement Program encourages and requires a team approach, which involves engaging and involving staff, children, parents and the whole community.

The Centre has set up a health and wellbeing team which comprises five

staff members from different areas of the service. Maree said that this ensures that everyone is represented. “It’s about getting the right people,” she explained.

Maree encourages others starting their health journey to be prepared, have a plan and not to do it alone.

The Achievement Program framework provides tools and resources that are available to help Victorian early childhood services focus on the health areas that are important to their community.

Focus areas may include:

- healthy eating and oral health
- physical activity
- mental health and wellbeing
- safe environments
- tobacco control
- sun protection.

Members are encouraged to meet best-practice benchmarks in each of these areas.

Maree said that the benefits of meeting the benchmarks are broad and ongoing – and benefit both the service and the community.

“Your efforts helping children learn healthy behaviors at a young age will benefit them for many years to come.

“As an added bonus, your efforts will be recognised by the Victorian Government,” she said.

The Victorian Government recognises and awards services that demonstrate leadership and meet the benchmarks in each health area.

To get involved, visit www.achievementprogram.healthytogether.vic.gov.au or call 1300 721 682.



Children from Ada Mary A’Beckett Children’s Centre enjoy an excursion at the beach.