



B.C. First Nations Head Start Using Traditional Foods

(BCFNHS *Growing Together* newsletter, ISSUE 5, Summer 2003, p.4-6)

IN MANY FIRST NATION HOMES ACROSS B.C. foods like moose meat, deer meat, baked salmon, dried salmon, canned salmon, oilcan oil, seaweed, dried berries and root vegetables have been common staples of meal times.

First Nation methods of preserving and caring for food are somewhat different than in non-native communities. When we prepare for winter months we utilize preservation methods such as drying, smoking, canning and freezing our food. We have no official means of grading our own food when we process it, but have relied upon traditional preserving techniques learned from our parents, extended family, and grandmas and grandpas.

As First Nation people, we have always eaten traditional foods—many of us have grown up on these staples of the land and feel it is important to share this with our children. But we are in a different economy now. Many parents have to work from Monday to Friday and often don't have the same amount of time to show our children traditional values, or even to go out on the land and gather food for sustenance. Some knowledge has been lost due to children (who are now parents) growing up in residential schools and foster homes away from their homes and communities. We are now struggling to re-learn our culture and heritage, and are often short of resource people in our own families and communities.

Head Start programs have big shoes to fill. We need to know how to safely incorporate cultural programming and traditional foods into our child care centres while meeting all licensing and environmental health regulations.

Many Head Start programs are licensed facilities, and as such fall under the Community Care Facility Act and the Child Care Licensing Regulation under the authority of the Province of British Columbia.

The interpretation of the regulation dealing with nutrition (section 32) falls to Licensing Officers and child care licensees (Head Start programs)—the regulation does not specifically state how traditional foods are to be prepared.

Under the child care regulations, Head Start programs are responsible to ensure that all food served is healthy. Head Start program kitchens are licensed and inspected under the federal authority of Environmental Health Officers of Canada. All cooking staff should have Food Safe certificates and follow safe food preparation methods to ensure children's health and safety.

How do we find a balance between interpreting regulations, food safeness, environmental health, federal and provincial legislation and regulations, and the cultural needs of communities?

Above all, it is the responsibility of Head Start staff to ensure that food is safe before giving it to children—young children under the age of three are especially susceptible to food-borne illnesses. Head Start programs are responsible for what is served to their children and could be liable if a child suffers from a food-borne illness.

Many Head Start programs follow the guidelines set out in *Food Flair for Child Care*, which clearly outlines food safe practices. *Food Flair* recommends that child care centres accept only donations of unopened food, and never accept donations of canning. *Food Flair* advises centres to establish specific policies about receiving food donations (policy areas can include discussion of trusted sources, food safeness, as well as traditional foods).

Splatsin Child Care Centre

At the Splatsin Child Care Centre in Enderby, the Head Start program incorporated some traditional foods into menus, with great care.

As part of the hunting unit in November, children learned how to traditionally smoke deer jerky. Knowledge of this process and how to build the smoker was given to cultural teacher Rosalind Williams by band Elder Emmeline Clemah.

For the preparation of the deer jerky, staff took many precautionary steps to prevent any chance of food-borne illness. The meat was donated by the husband of the cultural teacher, who could verify that it was properly cleaned and processed at a local meat processor and that the deer meat had been frozen properly and was not outdated (or freezer-burned). The meat was still frozen when sliced thinly for the jerky and immediately refrigerated once the marinade was put on. The centre used a tested marinade recipe from a cook book. The meat was taken from the refrigerator and immediately put on to the traditional smoker to dry into jerky, and smoke with cottonwood chips. The process of dry-smoking the jerky took approximately four hours.

Head Start staff also had a traditional meat luncheon that day where elk roast and moose stew were served to parents and children. Staff knew that the meat was processed at a local meat processing store and had first-hand knowledge that the hunters who donated the meat were trusted hunters who follow good food-safe and processing techniques. The traditional food was cooked in the Head Start-inspected kitchen by their Food Safe cook. The children all had signed permission slips from parents acknowledging that they could eat the traditional meats.

Cree-Ative Wonders Head Start

When the Cree-Ative Wonders Head Start preschool program wanted to serve traditional foods in their program, they did their homework first. They contacted the Environmental Health Officer in

Prince George and told her of their plan to serve traditional foods to children. The EO told them they could serve traditional foods provided they followed safety regulations and Food Safe. “She was really good,” says Nancy Anderson (Head Start coordinator).

The EO also provided a letter of recommendation, which Cree-Ative Wonders then submitted to their Licensing Officer, who approved their plan. “She visits or program once or twice a year and is really impressed with our program.”

Cree-Ative Wonders serves traditional foods quite often, including: moose, dried moose meat, bannock, deer, rabbit, and berries. Meat is obtained from local hunters who are known to the centre. “People are always happy to donate game meat to our centre,” says Nancy. “At home that’s what we eat; why not serve it at the daycare as well?”

Nancy does double-duty as a cook and coordinator. She is the main cook and prepares a majority of the meals, but also welcomes volunteers from the community, especially Elders. The centre has a fire pit outside and Elders have helped to teach drying moose meat on a stick. “We cook the meat by the fire and have some tea,” says Nancy. Other foods they have tried are: bannock on a stick, moose meat stew, moose stir fry, fried bannock and oven bannock.

The parents and community are in full support of this initiative to serve traditional foods to their children. Parents are informed through their child’s registration forms, where they are asked if they object to children eating traditional foods. There have been no objections to date. The Cree-Ative Wonders Parent Handbook informs parents of the program goal: to give children every experience in their traditional culture, language and food.

“An Elder did say... they have to taste it this way and to know that this is our way. They felt it was good that we’re doing this. This is our food, and for our children to carry it on [traditional food gathering and usage], they have to be able to experience it and enjoy it.”

--Nancy Anderson
Coordinator, Cree-Ative Wonders Head Start (Moberly Lake)

If you are considering using traditional foods in your centre

- Use proper food-handling techniques
- Know your source of food (who handled it and how)
- Restrict this to food sources that you know are safe (keep it limited because of spoilage, handling, processing)
- Advise parents (so they are aware of what their child is eating)
- Prepare the food on-site in an inspected kitchen
- Use common sense (make sure the food is in good condition, doesn’t have a rancid or fermented smell, is a good colour. Decide if you think it is safe to eat it yourself or to serve to your own child. If you don’t know—don’t serve it).

Source: Richard Lawrence
Manager of Environmental Health Services for First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada.

Community Care Facility Act: Child Care Licensing Regulation

“Nutrition

32 (1) The licensee shall ensure that:

(e) the food supplied to a child in a facility is sufficient in quantity and kind, to supply the child with all or part of the nutrient intake per day in “Recommended Nutrient Intakes for Canadians,” is recommended for children in the relevant age group, taking into consideration the number of hours the child is in the facility, and the child’s food preferences and cultural background.”

The Food Flair For Child Care Resource Package

This package is available from community nutritionists or child care licensing officers. In the phone book under Province of B.C. Listings, Health Authority, look for “Community Care Facilities Licensing” and find Child Care Licensing Officer or Community Nutritionist. Either should be able to give you a copy of the *Food Flair* resources or give you a relevant address, as well as provide advice on childcare regulations and the health and safety of food served in a child care setting. Gather as many ideas as possible to ensure that you are responsible and totally confident in the food-safeness of the food you are serving.

“The Licensee [Head Start program] must ensure all food is handled, stored, processed and served in a safe, healthful way. We encourage all Licensees to develop a comprehensive food plan for their centres that includes traditional and other culturally appropriate meals and snacks. These plans may differ from centre to centre, however each plan would include food choices and how foods are processed, handled, stored and served.

The topic of food safety can be discussed with your local Environmental Health Officer or Licensing Officer. If you have any questions or concerns, don’t hesitate to call your local licensing program.”

--Bev Guest, E.C.E., B.A.

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