

Keeping our noses out of the lunchbox - supporting positive kai environments in education settings

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Abstract

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Nourishing kai supports behaviour and concentration, tamariki learn well when food secure and eat regularly⁽¹⁾. Early food experiences influence our relationship with food as adults⁽²⁾ and that tamariki health and wellbeing are shaped by education environments⁽³⁾. WAVE (Well-being and Vitality in Education) has enduring partnerships with all preschools, kindergartens, playcentres, primary and secondary schools in our South Canterbury rohe⁽³⁾, supporting healthy education environments with the goal of reducing inequities in health and education outcomes. Despite concerns about food security and processed foods, health promotion advisors note kaiako reluctance to promote nutrition using a whole-setting approach. The whole school approach⁽⁴⁾ includes policies and procedures for kai (food) and wai (water), nutrition education within teaching and learning and nutrition messages promoted to whānau through enrolment information, learning stories/newsletters and displays, and in conversations with whānau. We describe an increase in kaiako acceptability occurring with the move from discussing nutrition as 'healthy eating' to using language of 'supporting positive kai environments'. We include examples of mahi that the education settings put in place in this process. Between October 2023 and June 2024, WAVE provided internal professional development for health promotion kaimahi, focusing on supporting positive kai environments. Resources were redeveloped to align with messages about fostering positive relationships with kai and encouraging tamariki to be food explorers⁽⁵⁾. The updated approach was widely communicated through newsletters and meetings with kaiako, alongside sharing relevant webinar and article resources from the Education Hub and Heart Foundation to support kaiako professional development. Health promotion advisors working with early childhood education and primary schools discussed nutrition within the broader context of positive kai and wai environments, aiming to develop positive relationships with food. These discussions took place through a combination of one-on-one meetings with lead kaiako each term and staff team meetings. Interview questions were sent to priority education (n=10) settings in September 2024 to gather feedback on barriers to promoting nutrition, how the change to 'positive kai and supporting kai explorers' has made a difference, and to hear the settings' plans for current and future action in their setting. Responses from 8 ECE indicated that WAVE PD workshops using Heart Foundation resources were the resources they found most useful in enabling them to support tamariki as kai explorers. The shift to 'positive kai environments' has given kaiako consistent positive language around food, created space for tamariki to be self-directing with food, and has been mana-enhancing for tamariki and whānau. Kaiako stated that this evidence-based approach has taken the pressure off food, and kaiako are more responsive to tamariki needs. Kaiako are more willing to approach nutrition messages in a holistic manner to support tamariki.

Keywords: food environments; evaluation; health promotion; Tamariki

Ethics Declaration: Yes

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