



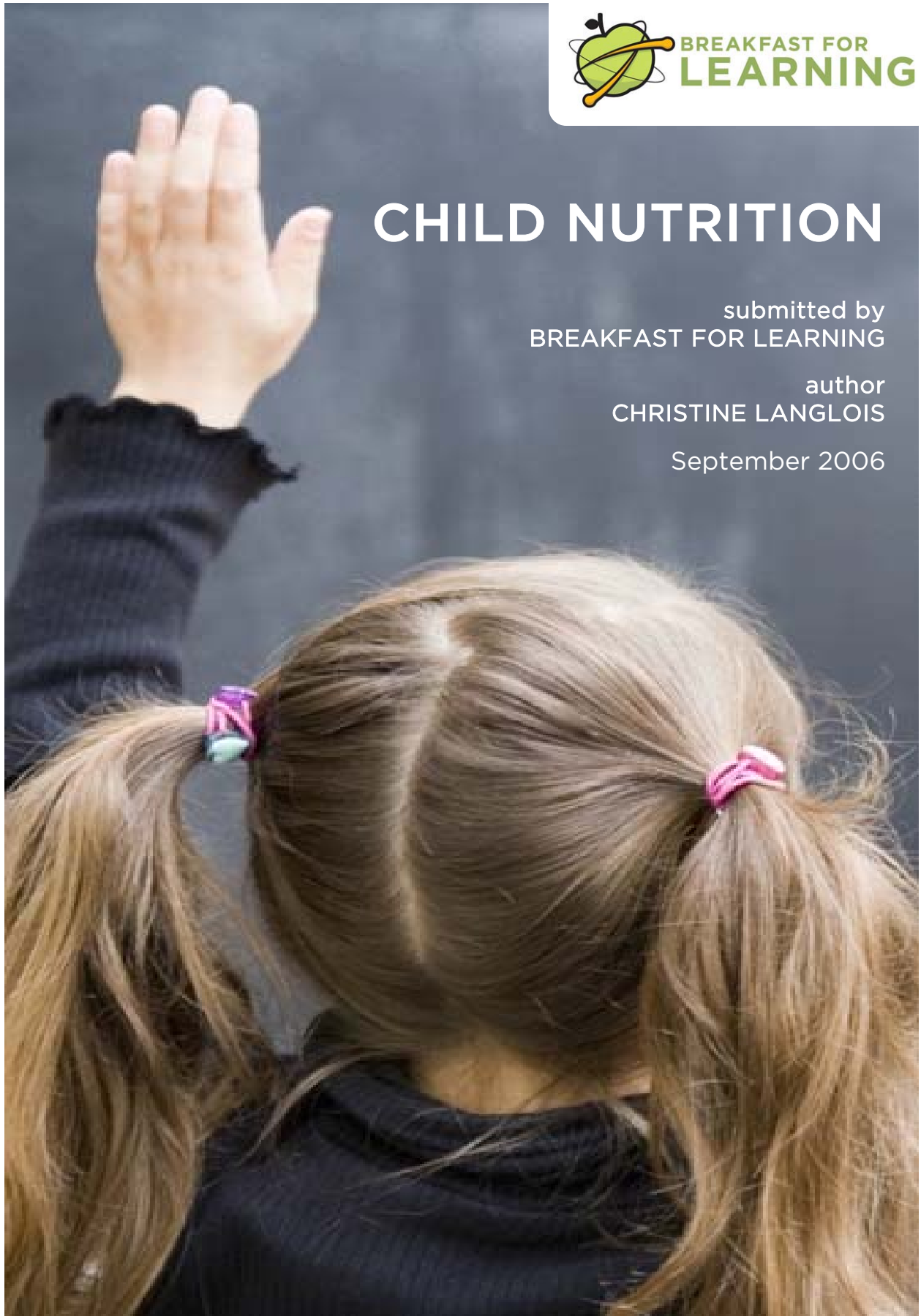
BREAKFAST FOR
LEARNING

CHILD NUTRITION

submitted by
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INTRODUCTION

Although nutrition is a fundamental determinant of child development at all ages, several unique nutritional needs and issues affect children in the middle years between ages six and 12. As children move out from the close embrace of the family into the wider world of school and the neighborhood, their nutritional intake continues to be guided primarily by their parents. However, children begin to eat some meals outside the home and to exercise more personal choice. They experience increased exposure to messages about food and nutrition directed at them by the food industry, through school curriculum and through the choices of their peers. In turn, they exert pressure within the family to modify food choices based on these outside influences.

Choosing what food middle years children will eat remains the primary responsibility of their parents but it is a responsibility that parents now must share and often influence indirectly rather than directly. For example, children in Canada consume one-third of their nutrition while at school. What these food choices are affects how children will develop physically, cognitively and emotionally during these middle years.

Work and Experience of Breakfast for Learning (BFL)

Breakfast for Learning's work, knowledge and experience are primarily in the area of feeding children within schools and before or during the school day. Working to ensure that every child in Canada attends school well nourished and ready to learn, BFL provides funds, nutrition education, resources and program support to student nutrition programs across the country.

As the leading, national non-profit organization solely dedicated to supporting child nutrition programs in Canada, Breakfast for Learning supports a network of programs in 5,000 communities across Canada. Almost all of these programs are in elementary schools, with a small number in high schools and other community locations. In the 14 years since BFL's inception, these universal programs, run by a network of 30,000 volunteers, have served millions of healthy breakfast, lunches and snacks to over 1.5 million school-age children.

BFL follows a made-in-Canada community development model in which programs are created and managed locally by teams of parents, educators, public health and local government and business representatives to meet the needs of local children and families. Through a broad consultation with stakeholders, BFL has developed a national quality standards program that lays out best practices for food quality and nutritional content, program management, financial accountability and safety (including staffing ratios) for its funded programs.

Overview of Existing Policy and Legislation

Internationally, most countries have both policies and legislation in place to support, regulate and set standards for the feeding of children while in school. The United Kingdom and United States have had national comprehensive school meal programs for decades.

Despite the mounting evidence of need, Canada remains one of the few developed countries without a national meal program for children. In Canada, no national government policy or legislation exists to support, regulate or set standards for the feeding of children while in school. As well, no Canadian province or territory has

legislation governing the feeding of children in school. However, several Canadian provinces do have written policies. For example; New Brunswick Department of Education developed the Food and Nutrition Policy for New Brunswick Schools in 1991. In 2005, Ontario issued Nutrition Guidelines for Student Nutrition Programs.ⁱ

Policy Initiatives

While Canada is far behind other countries – both developed and developing – in policies to support optimal child nutrition, several initiatives are currently being discussed. Among them are:

Canadian Children’s Food Bill

This is modeled on the UK Children’s Food Bill, which has the support of 160 national organizations including the British Medical Association and British Dietetic Association. If passed, the UK bill would restrict food marketing to children, set standards for school meals and require the government to promote “the consumption by children of food considered by it to be of benefit to their health and well-being.”

All international policy initiatives, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Millennium Goals, to which Canada is a signatory, seek to reduce childhood hunger and promote nutritional well-being for all children. Delegates, including Canadian delegates, to the recent Global Child Nutrition Forum held in Los Angeles in June of this year passed a resolution urging governments “to accept responsibility for ending childhood hunger by promoting and supporting school feeding.”

Issues

The quality of many Canadian children’s diets is poor. More than 24% of children in Grade 4 do not eat breakfast every day; by Grade 8, 47% of girls and 33% of boys do not eat breakfast daily.ⁱⁱ

Obesity rates, which are related both to food intake and physical activity levels, are increasing steadily, particularly in middle childhood and teen years. Eating habits and physical activity patterns are known to be important determinants of healthy body weight. Interaction among the range of individual/ behavioural and environmental determinants of health contributes to the current epidemic of obesity.ⁱⁱⁱ In one recent study it was found that children who did not eat breakfast were 1.5 times more likely to be overweight.^{iv}

Many Canadian children live with food insecurity issues. Families with children are the fastest growing segment of the population using food banks and shelters.^v In a 2004 national study performed by the Canadian Association of Food Banks, over 39% of food bank users were children and the number of children using food banks has increased since 1989, the year the federal government promised to eliminate child poverty.^{vi}

Much of the research around child nutrition relates to nutrition and cognitive development. For example, teachers observe that children who come to school hungry are less able to concentrate compared to nourished classmates.^{vii}

What has Highest Priority?

The highest priority for improving children’s nutrition and impacting positively on their development in the middle years is to ensure that they have access to good quality food and regular opportunities to eat and drink under caring and nurturing adult supervision

at developmentally appropriate intervals. According to Canada's Guide to Healthy Eating, children from ages six to 12 should follow their appetite as a guide to when and how much they should eat, which will vary considerably depending on their daily physical activity level and growth patterns. According to the guide, this means making food available to children when they need it.

Many children do not have this basic access to food. Children who have long bus rides to school may eat breakfast at 7 a.m. and then not again until noon or later. Because most schools are poorly equipped and staffed for feeding children, children may be forced to eat their lunch in hallways or school gyms on the floor wearing their winter coats in preparation to go outside after their meal. A related issue is that children often are given insufficient time to eat. Under these circumstances many children may not take in enough calories, may not have anything to drink. Children may return home to empty houses where they are responsible for preparing their own snack. Or, they may take part in after school programs where no food is provided. When children do make their own choices about food, it is often in situations where they don't have access to high quality, nutrient dense food. Children from families with a low socio-economic status may have periods of food insecurity when their parents cannot offer enough food or food that is of high nutritional value.

In other segments of Canadian society, the need for appropriate nutrition is embedded in law for both adults and children. For example, federal and provincial labor laws require workers to be given regularly scheduled breaks for eating and drinking. In daycare legislation, nutrition figures prominently. In Ontario's Day Nurseries Act, for example, sections 39 to 43 stipulate when children should be offered food, the nutritional quality and food safety requirements to follow.

The second major priority in the area of child nutrition for middle childhood is the need for a counterbalance to the overwhelming media and marketplace messages that encourage children to eat and drink food that does not support good health. It is estimated that Canadian children watch television about 23 hours a week.^{viii} A review of over 40 studies conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2004) links TV viewing association with overweight and obesity to food advertising, stating that: "it appears that the main mechanism by which media use contributes to childhood obesity may well be through children's exposure to billions of dollars worth of food advertising and cross-promotional marketing year after year, starting at the very youngest ages, with children's favourite media characters often enlisted in the sales pitch."^{ix}

Many of the foods advertised and directed at children are low in nutrients such as vitamins and minerals, which necessary for optimum growth. They are also high in sugar, fat and salt, which can increase the risk of disease later in life. Both children and their parents are persuaded by these messages to choose these foods over low fat, unprocessed, nutrient dense foods. Children are exposed to these messages both in the home through television, the neighborhood through outdoor and in-store advertising and, in some cases, in schools.

These messages have had their intended effect. The fast food, snack food and prepared food industries have grown at unprecedented rates in recent years and with it more advertising has penetrated the market. Food and beverage advertisements to children

accounted for 23% of all advertisements in 2006 and those targeting children was the largest single category of ads.^x

In Canada, the province of Quebec has had a ban on advertising (including food advertising) to children under 13 since 1980.^{xi}

Consequences of Child Nutrition Issues

The consequences of many Canadian children's diets being low in nutritional quality are that these children may not reach their developmental potential. This has ramifications for the individual child as well as Canadian society in terms of loss of human capital.

- While good nutrition enhances a child's ability to learn, poor nutrition results in cognitive impairment. A child who is hungry has difficulty concentrating, is more easily distracted and may exhibit behavioural problems. A hungry or under-nourished child cannot take full advantage of education opportunities and may disrupt other children from learning as well. The Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health's Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment - March 2004 says:
"The Toronto District School Board recognizes the direct relationship between healthy nutrition and the academic achievement of our students: that healthy nutrition helps to support students' learning, and enhances their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development; that well nourished students are able to concentrate better, retain and apply information more effectively, and are more likely to demonstrate positive behaviours and relationships with peers."^{xii}
- Poor nutrition has links to the rise in obesity with all the attendant physical and emotional problems, including an increase in Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer and depression. The rise in obesity is linked to lower life expectancies. Currently 25% of children in Canada are overweight and of those, 9% will be obese adults.^{xiii}
- Poor nutrition undermines efforts to improve children's physical activity levels. Without proper nutrition, children do not have the energy to participate fully in physical activity.
- Poor nutrition may affect a child's emotional development. Although little research has been done in this area as it pertains to middle childhood, it may be useful to extrapolate from best practices within the day care field, where feeding and mealtimes are planned not only to meet children's nutritional needs but as opportunities to develop emotional attachment with children in care and to support children's emotional development and sense of community with other children.

SUGGESTED POLICY FRAMEWORK

Policy goal, principles

Effecting change in children in the middle years is best accomplished within the school setting. Therefore, a primary goal is to establish a national policy to ensure proper nutrition for children within the education system. Nutrition should be provided within a nurturing environment meeting national standards for food quality, safety, and staffing.

While government supported, these nutrition programs would best support children when developed using a multi-sectoral approach that recognizes that communities have a collective responsibility for children that they best fulfill through meaningful involvement of parents and other members of the local community. Nutrition programs for children should neither be institutionalized, nor driven by commercial interests.

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Christine Langlois has written extensively on child development and child health issues. She is the editor of the Canadian Living series Growing with Your Child, Raising Great Kids and Understanding Your Teen, and is currently revising Well Beings, the Canadian Pediatric Society health and development guide for day care practitioners. She is a director of Breakfast for Learning and sits on its Communications Committee.

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