

California

Overhauling Their Menu

At the [Neighborhood House Association \(NHA\) Head Start](#) in San Diego, California, registered dietitian and Director of Nutrition Services Kristine Smith, and the Nutrition Services chef teamed up to overhaul the menu to make preschooler meals healthier.

They switched their food operation from heat-and-serve style to one that involves producing all meals from scratch using fresh, whole, natural and organic ingredients. Now, NHA serves meals that are packed with nutrients and taste delicious.



The chef at Neighborhood House Association prepares Baked Herbed Panko Cod.

Why Change the Menu?

“At NHA, we saw a big opportunity to positively influence children’s eating habits by creating a healthy menu and serving nutritious foods,” said Kristine Smith.

For info about *Let’s Move!* Child Care and to read more success stories, visit the *Let’s Move!* Child Care website, www.HealthyKidsHealthyFuture.org, created and hosted by Nemours.

A healthy menu gives children the opportunity to choose only healthy options from among a variety of nutritious foods. It’s easy to feel the need to prepare meals with chicken nuggets or pizza because you believe your children will only enjoy these “kid foods” and will not eat vegetables. In fact, preschoolers should be exposed to a wide variety of foods so that they can learn to like the taste of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods. Food preferences develop at an early age, even in infancy. When you teach children to enjoy and choose wholesome foods early on, you can help them develop healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.

Plus, young children are growing every day, and nutritious meals and snacks help them get the nutrients and vitamins they need for healthy growth and brain development. Cooking meals from scratch provides a more wholesome and nutrient-dense meal, compared to processed foods like frozen fish sticks, pasta sauce, deli meat and many bread products that are high in salt, sugar and fat and low in nutrients.

NHAs Menu: Before and After

NHA’s old menu contained cereals and crackers, cookies, canned produce, hot dogs, deli meats, frozen fish sticks and chicken nuggets. All of these products are considered to be “processed” or “convenience” type foods that have long shelf lives and require little preparation besides heating. Foods like frozen fish sticks and chicken nuggets are fried before the freezing process, which increases the fat

content even more. While they may be convenient for preparation purposes, these foods are low in nutrients and high in fat and salt.

Today, NHA’s Nutrition Services prepares breakfasts, lunches and snacks from scratch every day. Everything from flavored cream

cheeses, soups, entrees, side dishes and even salad dressings have recipes that the staff prepare fresh daily. In an effort to serve more nutritious bread products, NHA’s Nutrition Services worked closely with a local bakery to develop customized products that use only wholesome ingredients.

Compare the old and new menus, and see the changes that NHA made:

Old NHA Menu	New NHA Menu
Breakfast	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheerios, fruit cocktail and 2% milk • Rice Krispies, canned pears and 2% milk • Corn Flakes, canned apples and 2% milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organic honey granola with cherry-mango compote and 1% milk • Kashi Heart to Heart, fresh apple and 1% milk • Multi-grain bagel, homemade raspberry cream cheese, banana and 1% milk
Lunch	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spaghetti noodles with diced deli turkey meat, red Jell-O with strawberries, green Beans and 2% milk • Chicken nuggets, coleslaw, canned apricots, whole wheat roll and 2% milk • Sloppy Joe, french fries, broccoli florets and 2% milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spaghetti with sicilian meat sauce, roasted zucchini and mushrooms, Caesar salad and 1% milk • Chicken with homemade BBQ sauce, red rose mash with roasted corn, multi-grain roll, apple and 1% milk • Vegetarian black bean chile verde with a locally made corn tortilla, papaya chunks, romaine salad with tomatillo vinaigrette and 1% milk
Snack	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teddy Grahams and apple juice • Oatmeal cookie and 2% milk • Saltine crackers and orange juice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roasted garlic & rosemary bean soup with a whole wheat cracker • Cilantro hummus and all-natural pita chips • Gingered mango fruit cup and milk

The New Menu Made a Difference

NHA’s new menu is more than just a listing of the daily meals; it is inspiring families of NHA’s preschoolers to eat healthier at home. Parents report that children now identify and ask for foods in the grocery store that they eat at school, such as asking for spinach salads, fresh

salsas and squash. Parents often request recipes from NHA’s Nutrition Services because their children enjoy the food.

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The success of the new menu led NHA to start other healthy initiatives, such as:

- **Lesson Plans** that teach children how and where food grows and how it is prepared
- **Farm to Preschool Activities** like providing locally made or grown foods, taking children on field trips to farms or community gardens and planting school gardens and using them as learning environments
- **NHA's Multi-disciplinary Garden Committee** to educate teachers on the importance of growing food at the center and how to conduct cooking experiences with children using the food they harvest
- **Let's Move! Head Start Olympics**, which encourages physical fitness

The new menu is also inspiring change beyond NHA. School, preschool and Head Start providers in the San Diego community and from across the country have visited NHA to learn about their innovative food service model and have adopted the model in their programs. Community organizations and agencies are following NHA's lead too, initiating efforts to improve their own food service operations.

“Children in our program have dispelled the myth that children don't like ‘healthy’ foods. They are not only willing to eat meals that are packed with nutrients, but they are enjoying the healthy foods on their plates ,too. Recent survey data shows that nearly 96% of children and families enjoy the meals served.”

- Kristine Smith
Director of Nutrition Services, NHA

Tips for Success

- **Highlight a new fruit or vegetable every month** through fun lessons and activities, like painting pictures of apples, reading a book on oranges or cooking a recipe with the featured produce. Try using the Harvest of the Month materials from the Network for a Healthy California, which include a variety of fun lessons and activities for young learners (ages 2-5).
- **Coordinate your family newsletter with your menu.** For example, if you're preparing a chicken dish, include nutrition facts and the recipe for that dish (or a similar dish) in your newsletter so families can try it out at home. For kid-tested, quick recipes to share with families, take a look at *Keep the Beat Recipes: Deliciously Healthy Family Meals*. In this recipe book, you'll also find cooking tips and ways to get kids involved in the kitchen.
- **Implement Farm to Preschool at your site.** Visit the Farm to Preschool website to learn about Farm to Preschool program models, find nutrition and garden-based curricula and get ideas on how to involve families.

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