



FEATURE:
Soil to stomach:
A new way of eating
for children in
our centres

Lisa Bryant
Early Childhood Advocate

When Stephanie Alexander was a child, she grew up in a household where food was important. The family had ducks, chickens, a vegetable garden and an orchard. Food was grown, harvested, collected and lovingly prepared and everyone sat down at a big table to eat. She didn't realise that this was not everyone's experience. When she first heard the statistics on childhood obesity in Australia, she was shocked. And so she should have been.

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Stephanie Alexander, culinary icon and creator of the Kitchen Garden Program

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare released a report a few months ago that shows that a whopping one in four children between the age of two and four are overweight or obese. (Sixteen per cent of all Australian two- to four-year-olds are overweight and 9.2% of them are obese.)

Time to act

Stephanie decided she had to act. As one of Australia's greatest food educators, she thought she could make a difference. While aware that food is not the only cause of obesity, she thought if she could change children's attitude to food, to move them away from the processed food that many children now eat daily, she could help change those statistics. And so the **Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation** was created.

Starting off in schools with older children, education and care centres soon clamoured for the program to be adapted for our sector – and now it has been!

Like many things that happened just before COVID-19 hit, you may have forgotten of the launch of the program at Clendon Children's Centre in South Melbourne. But the program has continued through lockdown and now 45 Victorian education and care services are rolling it out (153 nationally). How many services does the Foundation want the program to be in? Josephene Duffy, the Foundation's CEO, laughs at the question. 'Every single one! We want to change the food culture for children across Australia – and this is how we are going to do it.'

Not just about gardens

So what is the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program and, more importantly, what would it look like in your centre, with your children? The first thing to know is that it is not just about gardens! It's mostly about food. Or as Josephene puts it 'great, fresh, seasonal, delicious, food'. That's why

it's called 'pleasurable food education'. She says it is about making children excited by new tastes and excited to eat fresh food because they have watched it grow or know where it comes from. Josephene describes an educator or cook walking around a centre with a portable pantry overflowing with freshly picked produce from the centre's garden who calls out to ask which children want to do some cooking. Of children rushing over because they know from prior experience that this is fun and means delicious food to eat. Of the educator and the children discussing what dishes they could make with the ingredients. Once the decision is made the children and educator/cook make it together. Finally they all sit down at a table and divide the big salad, or whatever it is they have prepared, into smaller bowls, sharing the food. They eat while all sitting around a table, just like Stephanie Alexander did when she was a child.



Josephene calls this a 'soil to stomach experience' and says children get excited about preparing (and growing) their own food. Josephene believes that by engaging children in the whole process of growing food, preparing it, and eating it, it helps to develop positive food habits. She says that 'seasonality is important because this is what makes food fresh and tasty'.

But what if a centre doesn't have space for a garden, what if they don't have a space for communal eating? Josephene says that she has taken on the philosophy of gardeners – 'that there is always a way. Do you have a wall in the sun? What about creating a vertical garden?'

'Rock star' cook

One centre that has been involved in the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program from the first trial of it in early education and care centres is Clarendon Children's Centre. A small 40-place community-

based centre, Clarendon doesn't have a lot of spare space. The coordinator of Clarendon, Linda Davison, says that they have made it work because the centre's cook, Julie Lemmon, is a rock star. She says that Julie has a 'deep and committed interest in educating children about healthy eating and nutrition and sustainability' and realised that the Stephanie Alexander program was a way they could bring all those things together. Julie was pleased when the Foundation concluded they couldn't just dumb down the program they had already written for schools, but had to develop it anew for education and care centres to make sure very young children could be actively involved in planting, nurturing and growing the food – as well as cooking it. Of course, they also had to ensure it fit perfectly with the learning frameworks and the NQF.

Julie says you should 'never underestimate the palate of a child'. And you should actively try

and expand that palate. She says that although 'children can be cautious eaters, by making them more curious and involving them in their own food preparation, they become proud of their creations and the taste of them'.

'Not just for older children

And Julie doesn't just work with the older children. She says that with the under two-year-olds she will often make and knead dough to which they can add fresh vegetables to make bread and scones. They can also prepare their own vegetables and mash them. Next week she is going to help them make free-form pasta strips from dough then top it with a green pasta sauce they'll make from the vegetables they have picked from the garden, like silverbeet.

And with the older children? 'We do more structured cooking.' She describes a cooking from the fridge experience that teaches children about

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Educator Caroline Hamilton with children at Clarendon Children's Centre



sustainability and the importance of not wasting food.

Julie has also been doing a huge project with the older children about cultural diversity and food – cooking first the breads of the world – damper, bulla, pretzels, bagels – and teaching that ‘everyone eats the same food world-wide, just with different flavours’. After breads, they moved on to noodles, rice and dumplings of the world.

And at Clarendon, every Tuesday and Thursday one of the rooms make afternoon tea for one of the other rooms.

Josephene says that something else exciting happens when children pick and prepare their own radishes, carrots and tomatoes.

Families also get involved and get excited about what the children are eating and making.

Everybody, not just the children, learns that broccoli ‘comes from a seed and needs sunlight and water to grow. That someone needs to keep the caterpillars off it.’

So what does a service actually get when they join the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program? Josephene says the program gives services a framework of professional development, resources such as recipes and a range of other supports to help your service

start along the road to delivering pleasurable eating education.

And the best thing?

If caterpillars get into your garden or your chickens aren't laying, there is always someone to talk to about it. ‘We create a relationship with your centre and work with you to do what you want to achieve.’

Children happily eating and growing healthy food? Who wouldn't want that?

Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program

Cost? \$330 the first year then \$165 thereafter

What do you get? A framework, PD, visual recipes, self-assessment tools, workbooks and support.

Read more: www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au

Contact them: 1300 072 543 or support@kitchengardenfoundation.org.au

