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Forster preschool's healthy-eating program a finalist in national awards

A program to encourage healthy-eating habits in preschoolers is a finalist in the 2014 HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards.

Lillypilly Preschool in Forster, NSW, is one of five finalists in the Advancing Pedagogy and Practice Award category.

The Preschool has been recognised for developing a program to reduce pre-packaged foods in lunchboxes and strengthening links between the preschool, home and the community.

The program is also improving the environmental sustainability of the preschool.

Early Childhood Educator, Casey Kent, said the initiative — called 'Locavore', which translates to 'local eater' — involves children growing fresh produce at home and cooking and eating it.

"We wanted to inspire our children to grow their own food. Every child at the centre was provided with a Locavore pack," Miss Kent said.

"The packs included organic locally sourced vegetable seeds and seedlings, how-to-grow guides, info sheets and a project timeline to help families set up a garden at home."

The children and their families were asked to grow the food and document their experiences through a description of the plants growth, drawings and photos of the children in the garden.

"The children proudly brought in the produce they had grown and a menu was planned with the help of local chefs and family-favourite recipes," Miss Kent said.

"They used produce from the harvest and other products sourced from a local farm, community gardens and neighbours' backyards, all within 100km of our centre.

"We held a Locavore night and shared the food cooked by educators, children and families."

Activities were set up for the children in line with the preschool's sustainability program including paper making, mini worm farms and seeds to replenish their gardens, planted in bio-pots made from recycled shredded paper.

"When Locavore began, approximately 30 per cent of families had a home garden," Miss Kent said.

"By the end of the program, all the children had some form of home garden and the influence of the program extended further, with many children saving seeds and propagating plants for neighbours and grandparents."

Miss Kent said the centre also encouraged less reliance on packaged food by handing out fresh alternatives.

A visual display was used to indicate the amount of plastic coming into the centre via lunchboxes. Recipes and healthy-lunch ideas were encouraged through a monthly newsletter.

Miss Kent and other interstate finalists will be flown to Melbourne for an awards dinner, where the winners will be announced during the Early Childhood Australia National Conference on Saturday 6 September 2014.

A \$30,000 prize pool will be shared among the winners, generously provided by long-term HESTA awards supporter ME Bank.

The Advancing Pedagogy and Practice, and Excellence in Building Inclusion Award winners will each receive \$10,000 to further implement their program or initiative. The winner of the Outstanding Young Graduate Award will receive a \$10,000 development grant.

HESTA is the super fund for health and community services, with more than 785,000 members and \$28 billion in assets. More people in health and community services choose HESTA for their super.

Visit hestaawards.com.au for tickets for the awards dinner or to learn more about the awards.

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