

## Food safety in pre-schools

## Some centres stick with in-house cooks

They say this allows them to better monitor hygiene, but some cite manpower challenges

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While some pre-schools are opting to provide catered meals to children, several – including NTUC First Campus and EtonHouse – are sticking with in-house cooks so that they can monitor hygiene standards and food variety.

There have been three food poisoning outbreaks in two months in pre-schools that serve catered meals to children, raising concerns about the risks of relying on external caterers, such as food being contaminated during delivery.

The most recent outbreak, which happened late last month, affected 13 PAP Community Foundation (PCF) Sparkletots centres, mainly in Sengkang and Punggol. It was traced to the consumption of food prepared by Kate's Catering, which PCF has since stopped using.

PCF said yesterday that 229 children had shown symptoms linked to food poisoning, with 31 of them hospitalised. As of yesterday, 30 had been discharged.

PCF has made alternative meal arrangements at the 16 centres which Kate's had been catering for.

In February, a lunch at PCF's Toa Payoh West outlet left 14 children suffering from vomiting and diarrhoea. Later that month, 30 children and one staff member developed gastroenteritis at Tanglin MindChamps pre-school.

A spokesman for the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) said investigations by the Health Ministry and the Singapore Food Agency into the recent outbreak are ongoing.

"Centres may prepare food in-

house or obtain food from a licensed food caterer for the children," she said, adding that pre-schools must adhere to ECDA's food hygiene guidelines, which were developed together with the National Environment Agency (NEA). These include proper procedures for preparation, storage and serving of food.

"All pre-schools have been reminded to exercise care in the preparation and handling of food, and maintain high standards of environmental, food and personal hygiene to minimise the risk of food poisoning and development of gastroenteritis in pre-schools," she added.

Most pre-schools contacted by The Straits Times said they preferred to hire in-house cooks, even though they can be difficult to find.

APCF spokesman said it started using catering services last August after running a pilot scheme. As of last month, 35 out of more than 350 of its pre-schools were using caterers, with the rest using in-house cooks.

St James' Church Kindergarten, which has 10 centres, hires its own cooks, although it also tried caterers twice this year.

Mr Lim Ee Tuo, its director of administration and operations, said: "We have our own kitchen staff, but we recognise that this model is also getting challenging because it's harder to find cooks nowadays.

"We wanted to test our operations if we need to have an alternative food supply, and get feedback about the catered food from the children."

He added that manpower issues at some smaller pre-schools have even forced principals and other staff to step into the kitchen when their cooks go on leave.

The Association of Early Childhood and Training Services, which



Madam Lim Chow Tee, 61, is in charge of the kitchen at MapleBear's Toa Payoh North centre, and prepares meals for the pre-school. Each of MapleBear's 37 centres has a kitchen with one or two cooks. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOOT

represents pre-school operators and teacher training institutes here, set up a centralised catering scheme in 2016 in an effort to raise productivity and save costs.

Under the scheme, two caterers now supply lunches to 65 centres, which each generally have between 30 and 70 children.

But the food catering business has been hit by several major food poisoning incidents in recent months.

Last November, an employee of Changi Airport's ground-handling firm Sats fell ill and died after eating food prepared by Spize's River Valley outlet.

The following month, NEA and Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore announced it had "enhanced the penalty regime for food establishments involved in sig-

## KEEPING A CLOSE EYE ON MEALS

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MRS PATRICIA KOH, chief executive of MapleBear, on choosing to hire in-house cooks over catering companies.

by buying second-hand equipment, which can break down easily, or cutting down on manpower. This can be problematic," Mr Tan added.

MacPherson Sheng Hong Child-care Centre has two in-house cooks serving about 150 children and staff. Its principal Wendy Tan said: "We can ensure the quality, hygiene and freshness of our food are not compromised."

Mr Ng Hui Zhan, executive director of EtonHouse International Education Group, said it hires about 40 kitchen staff across three central kitchens to serve 16 campuses.

"Having our own kitchens allows us to directly ensure that operational procedures with respect to cleanliness, health and food safety are aligned with the most stringent and highest standards," he said.

The centres can vary their menu on a weekly basis, so the children try new and different types of food, he added. Last year, EtonHouse also allowed the children to share feedback on the food they ate.

A spokesman for NTUC First Campus said its 162 pre-schools use in-house cooks and centre attendants to prepare meals. Besides going for vaccinations for measles, rubella and chickenpox, they are required to attend a one-day food and hygiene course before they are allowed to handle food, he said.

nificant food poisoning incidents".

Assistant Professor Li Dan, from the Food Science and Technology Programme at the National University of Singapore, said catering is "no doubt more cost-effective". But complications – such as additional delivery processes – can pose risks, for example, if temperature abuse or contamination occur.

"Children in general have lower immunity to pathogens in comparison with healthy adults, and therefore are more vulnerable to food-borne poisoning," Dr Li added.

Food industry consultant Patrick Tan said many food poisoning cases are due to the mishandling of food or lack of proper equipment like refrigerators or food warmers in delivery vehicles.

"Some people may try to cut costs

Mrs Patricia Koh, chief executive of MapleBear, said each of its 37 centres has a kitchen with one or two cooks. "If anything happens, you can pinpoint where the fault lies and any incidents will be more contained," she said.

"We have a lot of pitches from very enthusiastic catering companies. But we prefer home-cooked food as it's simpler and more fresh. We know where our food comes from."

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