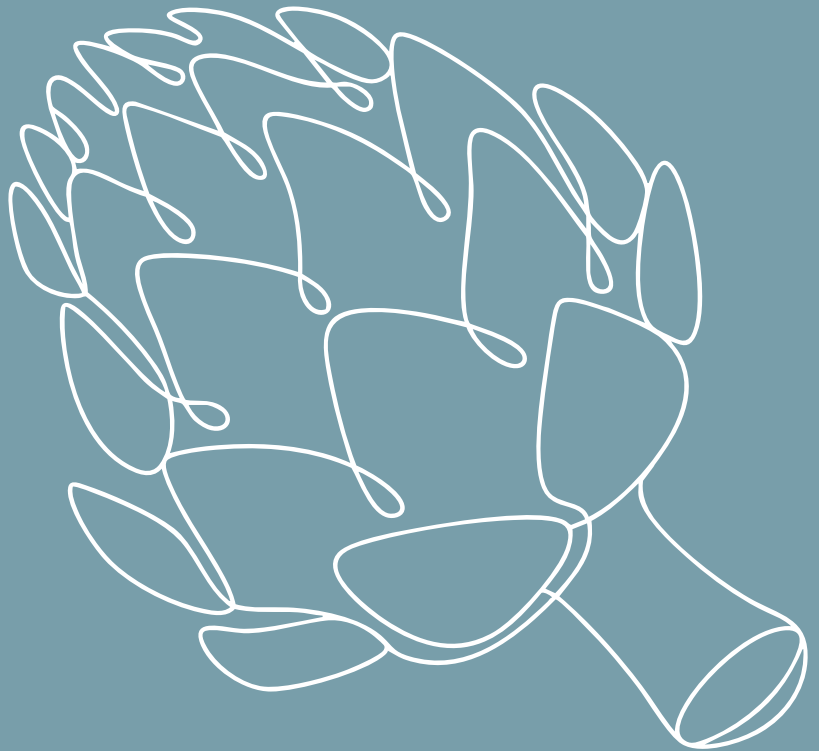




THE BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR
Early Childhood Education
and Care Food Environment

Food Education

MODULE 3



The Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment

Module 3: Food Education

This Food Education (FE) module is one of a series within *The Best Practice Guide (BPG) for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Food Environment, birth to 5 years*. The FE module provides practical, evidence-informed guidance aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) v2.0 and the National Quality Standard.

Suggested citation

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- Advice may not be applicable to a particular individual's needs and should always be considered having regard to medical advice provided to an individual.
- Where concerns exist about a child's safety, wellbeing, growth, development, swallowing or health, seek timely medical advice per your service escalation procedures. For emergencies, call 000.
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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands on which this guide was created across Australia, and recognise and respect the significance of their communities, cultures and histories.

Foreword

'Nurturing Healthy Futures Best Practice Guide' – launching September 2026

Early childhood is a powerful window for shaping lifelong relationships with food, health, and community. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services play an essential role in nurturing these foundations – not only by providing meals, but by creating environments where children feel safe, included, curious, and connected. The 'Nurturing Healthy Futures Best Practice Guide' has been developed to support this vital work.

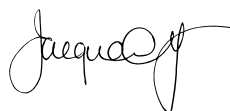
This guide brings together practical, evidence based strategies to help ECEC services reflect and enhance the food environments they offer across metropolitan, regional, and remote communities. Funded by Healthway and delivered by Edith Cowan University, it reflects extensive consultation, research, and collaboration with educators, health professionals, families, and community partners. The result is a resource designed to be both aspirational and achievable – supporting services to embed nourishing, culturally responsive, and sustainable practices in their everyday routines.

The guide is organised into a set of interconnected modules that together form a holistic approach to food provision and learning in ECEC. It provides practical guidance on everyday mealtimes practices, menu planning and meal quality, food safety, and food education, alongside strategies to strengthen partnerships with families and embed best practice into service-wide systems to support consistency, sustainability, and long-term impact.

Together, these modules acknowledge that safe and supportive food environments are not created through single actions, but through everyday choices, relationships, and shared commitments. They recognise the diversity of communities in Australia and the importance of culturally safe, inclusive approaches that honour children's identities and family traditions.

By adopting the practices outlined in this Guide, ECEC services can help build strong foundations for lifelong wellbeing for young children – supporting them to thrive physically, socially, and emotionally.

I hope this resource empowers educators and leaders to continue building safe and supportive food environments where every child feels included and respected, and where everyday food experiences support connection and nourishment. By noticing and responding to children's cues and partnering with families, services can support children's wellbeing as they grow and learn.



Dr Jacqueline McGowan-Jones

Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA)

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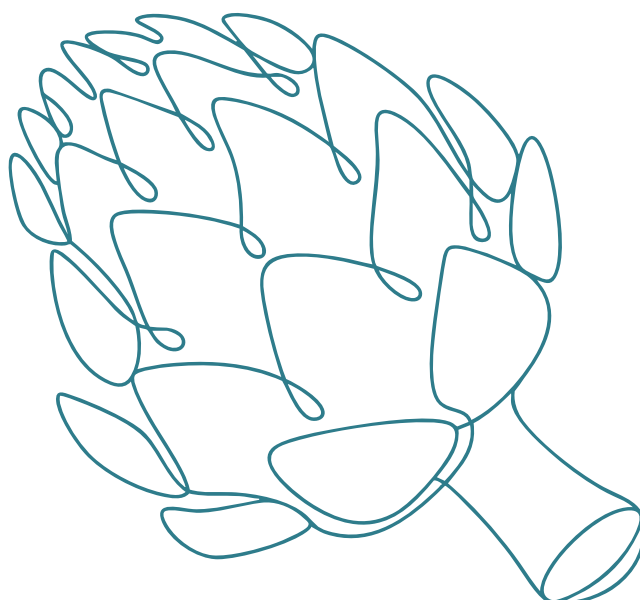
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Background

Food education (FE) in early learning settings is more than cooking – it is an opportunity to experience food in ways that include cooking but go far beyond. Food education gives children the opportunity for exploration, experimentation, learning, teamwork, skill building and much more. At the same time, services must balance safety, regulatory requirements, diverse developmental and cultural needs, family expectations and practical constraints such as time and staffing.

The FE module has been developed to support Early Childhood Education and Care settings (ECEC), for children from birth to 5 years, to create food experiences that are safe, engaging, inclusive and responsive to each child, while reflecting current evidence and the needs of the sector.

This module aims to:

- Provide ECEC services guidance on safety standards in food education, and support ECEC services to ensure food safety standards during cooking and food preparation experiences.
- Shift the focus of food education from a sole focus on nutrition, to a holistic experience that considers child preferences and needs, food allergies, ECEC service resources, educator skill levels and awareness of risk.
- To support ECEC staff to understand children's developmental pathways and adapt food education to reflect each child's readiness, preferences, and way of engaging with food.
- Provide support to educators and services on how to plan and manage cooking and food preparation experiences.
- Provide a Best Practice Guide based on current evidence and current needs of the ECEC sector and supporting the public health sector.
- Provide recommendations that are informed by an understanding of child development, and the impact of anxiety on food preferences and eating skills for a variety of reasons, including food allergy, trauma, neurodivergence, and disabilities.

The sections below outline why this guide was developed, how it connects to the Artichoke Model and who it is designed for.

Why this guide was developed

Many Australian children spend long hours attending ECEC each week. In June 2025, 901,050 Australian children attended ECEC.¹ Children spend on average four full days per week (34 hours) in centre-based care and three full days per week (26 hours) in family day care. In these settings, they share meals with their peers and receive support from educators. Within these settings, food and mealtimes feature across the whole day: during planned meals, in conversations with families about what children are and aren't eating, and in everyday teaching and play experiences.

This creates daily opportunities for connection, co-regulation and children's self-regulation in eating, as well as for learning and development.

The FE module was developed to support ECEC staff to build their awareness, confidence and practical skills in these areas. It is designed to help services create food education that is safe, inclusive and responsive to each child, and to support a whole-of-service approach to the food environment in early learning settings. The FE module sits within the Artichoke Model (Figure 1), which guides the overall structure for this Best Practice Guide.

What is the Artichoke Model?

The Artichoke Model: ECEC Food Environment Model² is a visual way of looking at the whole food environment in early learning settings.

Like the layers of an artichoke, the model places children's everyday food experiences at ECEC at the centre, with the people, places, systems and routines that shape those experiences being the 'leaves' surrounding and supporting the child. Each 'leaf' represents a key area of the food environment, and together they show how everyday practices, relationships, curriculum, policies and service systems all work together.

Where did it come from?

The Artichoke Model was co-designed in 2024 by members of the National Nutrition Network for Early Childhood Education and Care (NNN-ECEC), drawing on their collective experience as researchers, practitioners and policymakers.² Through collaborative discussion and visual mapping, the group identified the key components of food environments, creating a simple, sector-owned way of mapping the ECEC food environment that feels recognisable to services and usable in day-to-day practice.

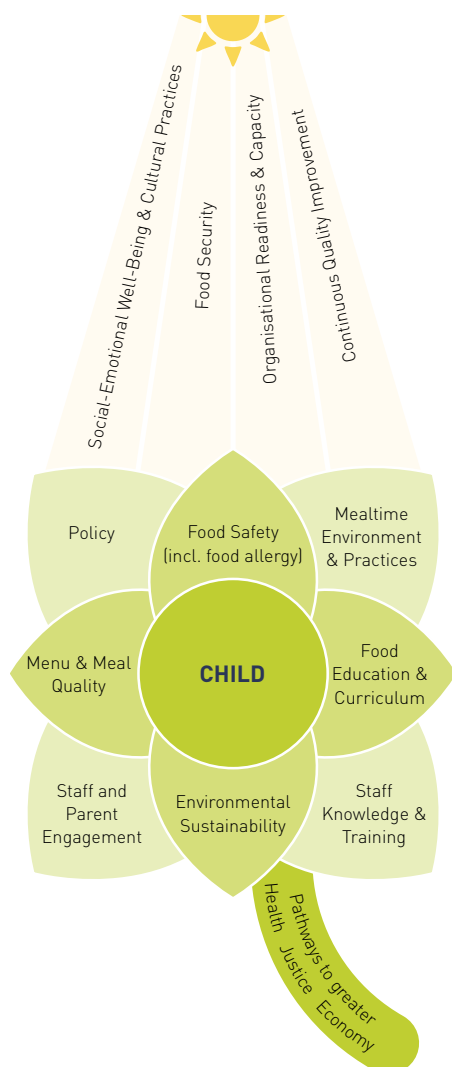
What does it include and why?

The Artichoke Model maps 12 connected 'leaves' across the ECEC food environment, grouped into three layers:

- **What – food provided** (for example: Menu and Meal Quality, Food Safety and Food Allergen Management, Food Education and Curriculum, Environmental Sustainability)
- **How – feeding practices and support** (for example: Mealtime Environment and Practices, Staff Knowledge and Training, Staff and Family Engagement, Policy)

- **Environmental levers – service conditions that shape what’s possible** (for example: Social-emotional wellbeing and Cultural Practices, Food Security of the ECEC service, Organisational Readiness and Capacity, Continuous Quality Improvement).

FIGURE 1: *The Artichoke Model*



Each leaf includes practical topics and reflection questions that services can use to think about where food and mealtimes already work well, where children might need something different, and what the next small step for improvement could be.

This Best Practice Guide builds on the Artichoke Model. The project team used the 12 'leaves' to scope and streamline key themes and sub-topics, then developed modules that turn the high-level map into practical recommendations, examples and tools for services. Each module zooms in on one or more parts of the Artichoke Model while still keeping sight of the whole service.

What does the Artichoke Model mean for FE?

Within the Artichoke Model, FE sits mainly in the 'What – food provided' layer, with links to the 'How' and 'Environmental levers' leaves. For FE, the Artichoke Model reminds us that engaging and impactful food education doesn't happen by accident – it is part of how the whole service and educational program work, how food education is embedded into everyday practices, and keeps the child at the heart of everyday decisions and planning.

The FE module turns this part of the model into day-to-day practice guidance, focusing on how planning safe and engaging food education experiences for children: lesson plan examples, safety and food allergy information, ideas for programming food education experiences and case studies to demonstrate interesting examples of embedded food education in services around Australia.

Scope of the Food Education (FE) module

What is included?

The FE module focuses on:

- Food education within ECEC services for children from birth to five years.
- How educators, cooks/chefs, and service leaders plan, organise and facilitate food education.
- The social, emotional, sensory and cultural aspects of food education.
- Supporting planning and delivery of food education experiences in ECEC services.
- Supporting risk awareness and reflective practice around food education in ECEC services.

What is not included?

This module does not:

- Replace the service's overall educational program or curriculum planning. This module provides food education examples, ideas and reflection prompts that educators adapt within their own program. Replace clinical assessment, diagnosis or treatment for feeding, eating or growth concerns.
- Provide protocols for specialist feeding therapy or oral-motor interventions.
- Override existing legislation, regulations, or individual healthcare/action plans for children.
- Focus on outside school hours care (OSHC) or home mealtimes, although some principles may still be useful in those settings.
- Replace the service's food safety obligations. Food safety relevant to cooking and food preparation experiences is embedded throughout this module.

ECEC staff and services should use this module alongside relevant regulations, service policies and any clinical advice for individual children.

Acknowledgements

This Food Education (FE) module was developed through a strong, collaborative co-design process. For the purposes of citation and attribution, those acknowledged under Education Consultants for Sections 1 and 3, members of the Best Practice Guide Project Team, the Food Education Working Group for Section 2 and Best Practice Guide Advisory Group, together with those acknowledged under Workshop Development and Facilitation and Meetings Chair, are collectively recognised as the Food Education Consortium. Contributions across the Consortium varied according to individual expertise and involvement and included Conceptualisation, Writing: original draft, and Writing: review and editing, as applicable to each contributor's role.

We sincerely thank the individuals and organisations represented across the Consortium for the breadth and depth of expertise they brought across early learning practice, nutrition and dietetics, childhood education, food allergen management, environmental health, public health, government, regulation, peak bodies, training, and service delivery. Their generous time, practical insights, and commitment to improving food environments in early learning settings have directly strengthened the relevance, feasibility, and quality of this guidance.

We are especially grateful to the educators, service leaders, cooks, and chefs in early childhood services across Australia who shared their time, everyday experiences, and honest insights during development. Their knowledge grounded this Guide in real practice and reminded us throughout the reach and impact of good food education for children and their families.

We acknowledge the National Nutrition Network for Early Childhood Education and Care (NNN-ECEC) for their foundational role in developing the Artichoke Model and for their sustained commitment to improving food environments for young children across Australia.

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Who this module is for

The FE module is for people working in ECEC services for children from birth to five years. The module applies across centre-based and family day care and is relevant whether food is provided by the service, brought from home, or a mix of both. Table 1 suggests how this module can be utilised for each target audience:

TABLE 1: *Intended users and use of the Food Education Module*

Intended users	How they can use this module
Educators and room leaders (including relief and casual staff)	To plan and program safe and engaging cooking and food preparation experiences and reflect on these experiences as part of ongoing quality improvement.
Service leaders and educational leaders	To set and align expectations for food education across rooms, inform or review service policies and procedures related to food education, and plan professional learning and reflective discussions with staff.
Cooks, chefs, food coordinators and kitchen assistants	To increase involvement in food education with children, assist with planning of food education experiences with educators, and support educators with these experiences.
Family day care educators	To adapt the principles to home-based food education, plan food education experiences that respond to mixed-age groups.
Approved providers and management teams	To support consistent expectations across services, align food education with organisational policies, and identify areas where staff may benefit from further support or training.
Allied health partners (e.g. dietitians, speech pathologists, occupational therapists)	To align advice and support with the service's food education approach, provide practical suggestions that fit within everyday routines, and use a shared language with educators and families around food education practices.
Quality and regulatory staff, inclusion support staff and local health promotion officers	To inform assessment and rating observations and guidance, support visits and resource development.
VET and university educators, RTOs and placement supervisors	To integrate food education content into training programs, prepare students for real-world food education in ECEC, and support reflective conversations during placements.

This module supports everyday practice in ECEC and does not replace clinical or medical advice. ECEC staff and services should follow their service policies and procedures, food safety requirements, and any individual allergy, healthcare or action plans for each child.

How to use this guide

Five sections

The guide is divided into five separate sections covering the following topics:

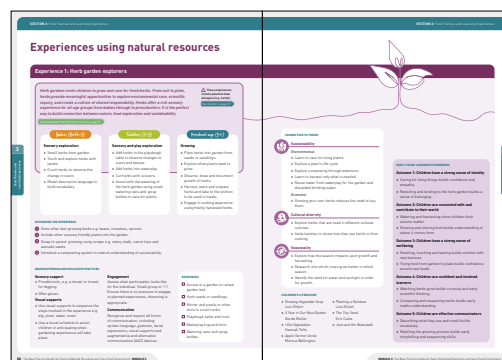
1. Embedding Food-Based Learning in Everyday Practice
2. Cooking and Food Preparation Experiences
3. Food Themes and Learning Experiences
4. Extending Learning Opportunities
5. Partnerships and Collaboration for Food Education and Curriculum Opportunities

Elements found across sections

Elements	Examples
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Learning experiences

A range of Learning Experience cards with ideas, considerations and differentiations as well as links to children's literature.



Case studies

Detailed case studies outlining a service's objectives, process, learnings and outcomes.



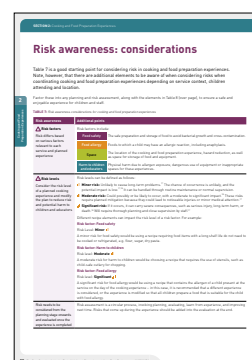
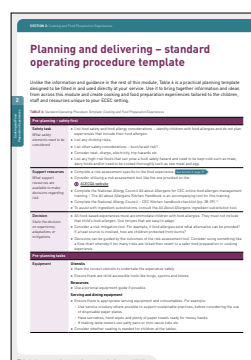
Practical cooking experience ideas

A range of practical cooking experience ideas differentiated by resources, budgets, cooking skills and ages and development stages.

Kitchen with utensils and equipment		
Preparation experiences		
These experiences require access to more specialist equipment such as an oven, stove and cookware.		
- Baking - Frying and sautéing - Roasting		
Cooking experiences		
These are experiences that use the full range of equipment available if there is access to a kitchen. Examples include fried rice and chicken wings.		
Stovetop/oven	Mini pot	Cooking fried rice
Making fast bowls	Use a mini frying pan or portable heater to make porridge	Heat based bowls like basic bowls or soups
Make meat by mixing flour and water, then frying in trays	Making soups	Baking bread (e.g. rolls and buns)
Roasting chicken wings (e.g. pork, beef, chicken, etc.)	Making mini quiches using bread rolls cut as a base	Making mini fritters using muffin trays
Creating a full package to plate experience for children to explore how to grow, care for food, then create their own meal plan with the ingredients they have grown. Children will then participate in the cooking and eating experience.		
Making oven baked pizza crigs - brush the pizza with oil and toppings (e.g. olives and cheese) and then top for sauce) (cheese and pepper for sauce)		

Planning, preparation and common risk factors

Support and signposting when undertaking planning and preparation and identifying common risk factors for cooking experiences.



Setting the scene

The following pages explore ways to embed food education into everyday practice in ECEC in safe, engaging, developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed and inclusive ways.

Food education is more than cooking. It offers opportunities for communication, sensory exploration, environmental awareness, and building social connections that benefit children throughout their lives.

This section outlines the key concepts of the FE module: embedding food education in routines, cooking and food preparation experiences and connections to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), extending food education learning opportunities using on and off-site resources, and building partnerships and collaborations to support food education.

Embedding food education into daily routines

Along with intentionally planned food experiences, engaging, play-based experiences about food and nutrition can be embedded into everyday routines. This includes mealtimes and free play. The objectives are to: expand children's exposure to diverse foods via experiential learning; support foundational learning in health, sustainability, family, culture and community connectedness; and promote learning about how food is grown and where it comes from.

Cooking and food preparation experiences

Cooking and food preparation experiences allow children to explore a variety of whole foods, food preparation methods, cultural food traditions, and to learn where food comes from. When these experiences are hands-on, children are able to make direct connections between the food they are preparing or cooking and the food they eat every day. In addition, they learn valuable life skills, use their senses to explore new foods and textures, and share a fun and engaging experience with their educators and peers.

Cooking and food preparation experiences provide children with rich learning opportunities when planned and prepared well. This section of the module supports the planning and delivery of food education experiences, as well as staff reflection on the experiences to assist with ongoing quality improvement.

Integrated learning

Food education in an ECEC setting offers many opportunities for authentic learning through the lens of the EYLF. Integrating food experiences across the five learning outcomes supports children's learning in ways that are connected, meaningful and responsive to who they are. Food-related topics, including sustainability, cultural diversity and seasonality, are also naturally embedded within food education, providing children with rich learning experiences throughout their time in ECEC services.

Utilising on-site and off-site resources to optimise extended learning opportunities

Extended learning opportunities can be optimised using available on-site and off-site resources. On-site resources include ECEC service gardens, compost bins and worm farm, while off-site resources include visits to local community gardens, farms, markets and shops in the community. These types of experiences provide the opportunity for children to develop an understanding of food, nutrition, sustainability, environmental responsibility, cultural diversity and traditions and community involvement.

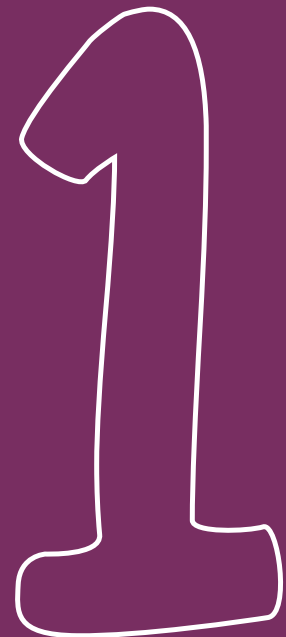
See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75

Collaborations within the system for support

Food and nutrition education can be enhanced by developing partnerships with community organisations, collaborating with local organisations, cultural groups and families. Through these partnerships, community-informed food experiences can be developed that support both the educational program and menu quality.

SECTION 1

Embedding Food-Based Learning in Everyday Practice



Embedding food-based learning in everyday practice

This section of the FE module focuses on developing engaging, play-based food experiences embedded in everyday practice in early childhood education and care settings.

It is designed to be used alongside the Mealtime Environment and Practices (MEP) module of the Best Practice Guide, which sets out the principles and practices for supportive, responsive mealtime environments. Where MEP focuses on the daily mealtime, this subtopic focuses on the play-based, child-led experiences that build children's curiosity, agency and learning through food across the day.

Food-based learning in context

ECEC settings play a vital role in providing time, space, safety and connection around food for young children. Play is both a process and context for learning in which children engage. They are curious to explore and pose questions. Embedding food-based learning through playful interactions can help young children develop a sense of belonging and build meaning from experience.

Food learning begins in the earliest experiences

If you've ever witnessed a baby learning to feed themselves, then you know how play and exploration go hand-in-hand with learning. When they smear yoghurt across their face, in their hair and up their nose, they are exploring the texture, smell, taste. They are engaging all their senses, playing with cause and effect and delighting in the process. Even before they have words, their communication attempts are often related to food, through signs, gestures or sounds, reaching for "more," pointing to their cup for "milk," or turning their head away when "all done".

Reflective questions

Educators

- *Think of a routine in your room. How could you deepen this to become a meaningful food related ritual? Are there any barriers that are stopping this from happening and how can they be overcome?*
- *In what ways do you foster children independence, agency and participation in preparing and caring for their mealtime environment?*
- *What observations have you made around children engagement with food related play? How have these observations informed your intentional input?*

Play as a pathway to food understanding

When a toddler engages in their first dramatic play experiences, it is in the home corner and play kitchen. They re-enact what they have witnessed every day in their home – they wash, mix, pour and cut their pretend food to serve to their dolls, peers and educators. Naturally, children are building their knowledge and understanding of food, food literacy and how it all connects to them, through their play and exploration.

Recognising the complexities of children's food experiences

It is important to keep in mind that for some children (and adults), food experiences are not always positive. For some, food and mealtimes can evoke stress, anxiety and uncertainty. Food security, food allergies, trauma, neurodivergence can all impact the experiences young children have with food. Being mindful of this when planning for and engaging in food experiences with young children can help to create safe and trusting environments.

Collaborating with children, families and the broader community is a powerful way to support inclusion, build trust and curiosity about food.

 When food-based learning experiences occur, the safety and social inclusion of children with food allergies must also be considered. Where experiences are pre-planned, ensure that information is communicated to families of children with food allergies, and that these families are given the opportunity to comment or contribute.

See Section 2, page 57

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 3, Outcome 4

Approaches to play-based experiences

The following outlines the different ways food education and learning experiences can happen. These range from intentionally planned experiences to those born from child-led interests and play, as well as opportunities for food education to be embedded within daily routines, including mealtimes.

Connecting play-based pedagogies and experiences with food education in ECEC

Intentional planning

Educators intentionally design and implement food-based experiences that extend children's learning. Through play, exploration and inquiry, food can become a driver for learning rather than being viewed solely for consumption.

Daily routines

Everyday moments such as mealtimes, eating occasions, and food preparation offer rich opportunities for learning. When approached with intention, these routines support agency, conversation, modelling, and confidence around food.

Mealtimes

Children's wellbeing, belonging and everyday food experiences sit at the heart of this Guide. The mealtime conditions that shape these experiences, including safe, calm, inclusive and responsive environments, food-neutral language, responsive feeding and role modelling, are explained in detail in the MEP module. The FE and MEP modules are designed to be read together. The play-based food experiences explored in this FE subtopic build on the everyday mealtime practices set out in MEP. Throughout this subtopic, where these terms appear, readers are pointed to the relevant section of MEP for full definitions and practice guidance. The case study, The Pom Pom Café, highlights this connection.

© See Case study, page 20 of this module

Child-initiated play

Children often bring food into their play through dramatic play, home corner experiences, sensory play, and imaginative storytelling. When educators observe and respond to these interests, food becomes a meaningful context for exploration, identity-building, and inquiry.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 2, Outcome 3,
Outcome 4, Outcome 5

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA5

How intentional planning shapes learning

Play-based pedagogies that are thoughtfully aligned with daily routines, environments and experiences, invite food to become a natural and engaging focus for learning. Intentional educators plan for and facilitate playful experiences that promote curiosity about food without expectations or pressure. In this way, food is used as a vehicle for exploration and inquiry, rather than just for consumption.

Creating low-pressure, inviting food experiences

Through intentionally planned experiences, food is presented in a low-pressure and inviting manner, giving children agency and opportunity to engage at their own pace. This intentionality from the educators ensures that food-based learning is seamlessly embedded throughout play, routines and experiences.

Practical ideas and examples of intentional planning for food-based learning are explored further in Section 3.

See Section 3, page 63

Daily routines

Shared food experiences form a natural part of children's everyday lives. When embedded through daily routines, they support learning and connection. Food-based learning doesn't sit in any one moment or routine of the day, it is continuous and relational. Children's sense of belonging, connection and shared responsibilities are strengthened over time when routines grow into shared practice and rituals.

From routine to ritual: creating meaning through shared food practices

The EYLF positions rituals as familiar and meaningful moments in a day that provide opportunities for deeper connection, wellbeing and learning potential. Viewed through the lens of food-based learning, everyday routines like mealtimes become rich, authentic opportunities for connection and learning. Below, we outline these common food-related routines and how they can be intentionally used, and deepened, into meaningful practices and rituals.

Common daily routines



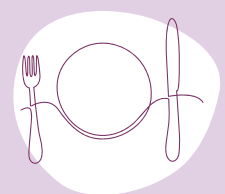
**Handwashing
before mealtime**

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Singing a handwashing song
- Sequencing steps with visual prompts
- Experimenting with glitter to represent germs

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Singing a shared song together turns handwashing into a moment of connection.
- Washing hands side by side turns an individual routine into a shared act of caring, for themselves and for others.
- Repeating the same steps each day gives handwashing a familiar rhythm the group can rely on.
- Small, shared moments like this help children feel part of a group.



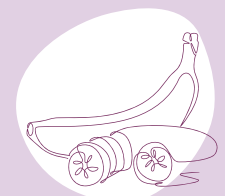
**Transition to
meal area**

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Helping to set tables (placemats, plates, utensils)
- Collecting lunchboxes and placing on tables
- Serving jugs of water and cups
- Allocating roles to children (table helper, compost helper)

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Preparing the table together each day builds a predictable, shared routine children can count on.
- Letting children choose small touches, like a centrepiece, turns the table into a space that feels like theirs.
- Giving children a role, like table helper or compost helper, lets them take part in getting the space ready.



Morning tea

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Self-serving from shared platters
- Pouring own water from jugs
- Recognising and responding to hunger and 'had enough' cues

See *Mealtime Environment and Practices*, Section 2, page 19

- Having choice to decide what and how much to eat
- Engaging in conversations about food preferences and experiences
- Engaging socially with others and practising extended conversations and turn-taking

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- A predictable, calm space turns morning tea into a moment where children's bodies and needs are listened to with care and respect.
- Responsive feeding, such as a progressive mealtime, builds trust over time as children learn to tune into their own hunger and 'had enough' cues.

See *Mealtime Environment and Practices*, Section 7, page 55

- Consistent language and modelling build a shared understanding that hunger feels different for everyone.
- An unhurried pace allows morning tea to become a space to gather and connect.



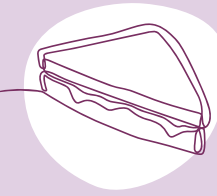
Lunch

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Sharing stories about food from home
- Noticing similarities and differences in lunchboxes (for lunchbox service centres)
- Exploring cultural food traditions
- Building food-based vocabulary around taste, texture and origin
- Sustaining conversations over a longer period
- Practising turn-taking by listening and responding to peers

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Lunch becomes more than a mealtime when treated as a shared gathering point, a moment in the day where things slow down and everyone comes together.
- A welcome or positive affirmation at the start of lunch signals a shared moment, inviting everyone in together.
- Sharing stories of culture, home and family during lunch turns eating together into a moment of genuine connection, where identities are seen and differences are met with curiosity and respect.
- Educators sitting and engaging alongside children during meals develop genuine, shared experiences.
- Repeated daily gathering turns lunch into a moment where children feel welcomed into the community and recognise their place at the table.



Afternoon tea

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Self-serving from shared platters
- Pouring own water from jugs
- Reflecting on the day's experiences together
- Engaging in sensory exploration of foods, noticing texture, smell, taste
- Practising turn-taking and sharing

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Afternoon tea becomes more than a snack when treated as a gentle transition, a moment of pause before the end of the day.
- Coming together to reflect on the day turns afternoon tea into a shared moment of connection.
- Slowing down for this thoughtful practice turns a small moment into something the group looks forward to, building shared memories and a sense of belonging.
- Serving themselves becomes an act of independence and an opportunity to notice and consider others' preferences and needs as well.
- A shared meal at the end of the day turns afternoon tea into a moment where relationships reset and connections are renewed.



Tidy up

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Managing spills and caring for the eating space
- Packing away dishes
- Wiping down tables
- Washing hands and face after eating
- Sorting compost and recycling

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Tidying up together turns a routine task into a moment of shared community care.
- Wiping tables, packing away and cleaning dishes becomes a chance for children to show that they care for the space and for one another.
- Including recycling, sorting and composting as part of the tidy-up ritual allows children to see themselves as eco-citizens and to develop the understanding that their actions matter on a larger scale.
- Repeated shared actions turn tidy-up from a chore into a way children come to understand and care for the space, and for one another.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 2, Outcome 3,
Outcome 4, Outcome 5

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA4, QA5, QA6

CASE STUDY

Mealtime rituals

A celebration of families and diverse mealtime practices

SERVICE	School of Early Learning West Leederville
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	6 months to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	160
NUMBER OF STAFF	39
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Perth, WA



Background

The School of Early Learning (SOEL) West Leederville is a large service with 160 places across 2 floors. Due to size of SOEL services, staff saw that it was important to intentionally build a sense of belonging and community for all children and families who attend. As part of these efforts, all SOEL services decided to focus on moving from routines to rituals in the baby and toddler age groups, and that included in the mealtime space.

Part of SOEL's ongoing professional learning involves staff from each room having a research focus, and over the past few years, transforming routines into rituals has been the dominant idea. Educators had begun learning about the importance of rituals in the ECEC space and wanted to start something to share mealtime rituals at SOEL, showcase to parents the rituals at the centre and learn about the children's rituals at home.

They began a collaborative book showcasing mealtime rituals at the centre. It was then sent home with families who filled it with their special mealtime rituals from home, which are then shared, celebrated and sometimes even incorporated into mealtimes at the centre.

What did you want to do?

- Communicate with families:
 - Share what they were doing in the service with families.
 - Increase communication with families.
 - Communicate a shared intention – meaningful rituals at mealtimes.
- Build community:
 - The overall goal was to bring everyone together by showing that everyone does things a bit differently, and celebrate these differences.
 - They also wanted something that could be interactive for families.
 - The Mealtimes Rituals book felt like the perfect way to do this.

What did you do?

Making the Mealtimes Rituals book

- They started the book by writing the rituals they did at the service during mealtimes across the day.
 - They used a simple, 120-page, A4 exercise book.
 - The older children created the cover page.
 - There is a sewing club in the older rooms, and children were asked to sew pictures onto a calico bag that would protect the book when it was sent home.
 - The front of the book contained a thank you to the sewing club children.
 - The first pages of the book contained information on rituals, the intention of the book and how to fill it out.

Using the Mealtimes Rituals book

- The book then started to be sent home, with families taking photos of their mealtimes rituals at home and decorating the pages with photos and pictures.
 - Parents could also email photos to the centre to print out if they weren't able to do it themselves.
 - Each child and family had their own page to fill out.
- Families then bring the book back and educators shared the mealtime ritual with the children, and even occasionally incorporated it into the centre's rituals.

What happens to the book when the children leave SOEL?

- When the children have finished at the centre, the books will be archived for a few years to document SOEL's work in this space.
 - Books that speak most loudly about the heart of SOEL will be kept and archived.
 - They will be converted to PDF and any faces blurred if necessary for privacy and anonymity.

The difference it has made

For educators and practice

- The addition of the mealtime rituals book has given educators the opportunity to add depth to their everyday experiences via incorporating practices from the children's homes:
 - Educators are able to highlight treasured moments in the lives of families at the service.
 - Educators use the book throughout mealtimes to slow down the centre's own mealtime rituals.
 - The book has also been a useful tool at the centre – they have found that when seeking ways to further support a child's mealtime experience, they can explore the child's individual mealtime ritual and draw on this knowledge to identify strategies that help the child feel settled and supported during mealtimes at the service.

- Staff have also seen that there is an opportunity to build upon this work by including rituals from other parts of the day.

For families

- They have had positive feedback from parents, with families eager to have a turn to add their mealtime rituals to the book.
- Families are able to see what others are doing during mealtimes at home, and learn from each other.

Top tips

- Start with 2-3 books so that if one book is out with a family, you can still work and teach from another book.
- Be clear on rules for adding photos to the book.
 - Consider advising families to avoid adding children's faces as the book will be sent home to different households and will be seen by people outside of the centre.
- If they had their time again, they would make the book more child-focussed than parent-focussed to encourage more involvement, especially from the older children.
- Some families can get really competitive about their page in the book!
 - Encourage families not to lose sight of the purpose of their entry.
 - Emphasise that the intent of the contribution is what is important (connection, conversation and experience), rather than how magnificent it looks.

The staff at SOEL West Leederville hope that the Mealtime Rituals book will be a living document that grows with the children, documenting the development of their mealtime rituals over time.

The book has been a wonderful way for SOEL West Leederville to create a welcoming community, where all children and families are celebrated and can feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.



CASE STUDY

The Pom Pom Café

A place for community, connection, learning and celebration

SERVICE	C&K Tully Community Kindergarten
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	Lunchbox service
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, not-for-profit
AGE RANGE	3 to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	66
NUMBER OF STAFF	6
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Outer regional

LOCATION

Tully, Queensland



Background

C&K Tully is a private, not-for-profit service, located in outer regional QLD. The service is licensed for 66 children over three rooms. It caters to children three to five years of age. Parents provide lunchboxes for the children's meals throughout the day. Currently the service employs 6 staff who make up the team. Their educational philosophy is grounded in the Reggio Emilia approach and has a focus on child-led and child-centred learning. The service is nature-based, with most of the day spent outdoors, has inclusivity and kindness at its core, and slow and flexible routines shape the day. They opened the Pom Pom Café in 2023 and have found it to be an amazing place for community connection, co-developing extended learning opportunities with the children and exploring and celebrating cultural diversity.

What did you want to do?

Through professional learning, staff were made aware that throughout the day there were plenty of positive interactions between staff and children, but mealtimes were an area that required support to increase these positive interactions. Staff wanted to find a way to make mealtimes:

- Less rushed.
- Less about directing and correcting.
- More about children enjoying meals when they felt hungry and eating at their own pace.
- More about having meaningful conversations at mealtimes that build oral communication skills, and build connections between people.

What did you do?

C&K Tully has received Uplift funding from the Queensland Government every year for the last four years. Uplift funding is designated to each service based on levels of socio-economic disadvantage and developmental vulnerability of the children and the services.

Services educating more children in areas of higher socio-economic disadvantage and who are developmentally vulnerable receive more funding to address developmental needs and decrease inequities caused by disadvantage.

- This funding has allowed staff to:
 - Engage in professional learning with educational consultants to improve their practice, for example in interactions with children during mealtimes.
 - Work with consultants to rethink and redesign how the service functions and works with children.
- Through working with consultants, discussion with parents, and a lot of critical reflection, the service decided to:
 - Start small with progressive morning and afternoon tea times (3-week trial).
 - Later move to progressive mealtimes (3-week trial).
 - Eventually the idea of the Pom Pom Cafe was born to incorporate progressive mealtimes, their outdoor environment, and support child agency in deciding when to eat.

Addressing parent concerns

There was some parent concern when progressive morning and afternoon tea were trialled. To address this concern, C&K Tully implemented processes during the trial period which have continued on to be used in the café:

Parent concern	Solution
Children who hadn't eaten would be overlooked and go hungry	A daily checklist of children's names to be marked off when they have eaten and record parent requests.
Parent wishes would not be accommodated in relation to mealtimes	A daily checklist of children's names to be marked off when they have eaten and record parent requests. Have a staff member present in the café throughout the day to speak with children and also supervise, monitor and record eating.
Children couldn't tell when they were hungry	Educators model listening to body messages throughout the day e.g. My tummy is grumbling – that means I might be hungry. I think I need something to eat. Posters are also placed around the play area to support children in tuning into their hunger and 'had enough' signals. Staff point to and discuss these throughout the day to remind children to tune into their body and then decide if they would like to go and eat.
Children who don't want to stop playing will never come and eat	Through building strong relationships with children, educators know which children may not want to stop playing in order to eat, so will give these children extra reminders.

Setup of the Pom Pom Café

- Located outdoors.
- Set up like a café – tables and chairs, tablecloths, decorative plants.
- Parents can come in and eat with their children at the café – this helps to build community connection.
- Has a closing time at 1pm to allow time to pack away.

What about hand hygiene?

- They have installed a handwashing station with individual towels in a bucket.
 - It takes 2 people to operate, so requires communication and teamwork.
 - To get the towels, the children practice their pincer grip and pinch the clean towel out of the clean bucket, then drop it into the used bucket.

- In the future, the centre will be getting a new handwashing station made by the men at the local Men's Shed.
 - This will be building on an existing community partnership with this Men's Shed where they have been fixing the centre's toy diggers for free.
 - The Men's Shed is keen to make the new handwashing station, that they will cost for the centre.
 - Funds for the handwashing station will be taken from those fundraised by C&K Tully's Community Advisory Group.
 - This act shows a commitment to keeping the cycle of community connectedness going at C&K Tully.

Is it easy to clean?

- Tablecloths:
 - Started with plastic tablecloths that are easy to wipe down.
 - Moved to cloth for a trial, and it was successful, however concerns remained about the risk of cross-contamination for children with allergies.
 - Solution – on days when children with food allergies attend, plastic tablecloths are still used as they can be cleaned more thoroughly between 'customers'.
- General cleaning:
 - With educator supervision, children are involved in cleaning up after they eat.
 - The centre provides child-sized equipment to encourage participation.
 - The idea is to develop independence, but also to build consideration of others by leaving the café tidy for the next visitors.
 - As the café is outside, staff can hose down the tables and floor at the end of the day as well.

What about supervision?

- The café is located in a part of the outside play area that allows the supervising educator to see the whole of the yard.
- There is another staff member out in the yard as well.
- Ratios are maintained at all times.
- Only 4-6 children come through the café at a time, and this also helps with supervision of eating and prevention of cross-contamination.

How did you name the café?

The children named it! It is located outside on the veranda, right under a big tree that has red flowers that look like pom poms! So, the children thought that would be the perfect name for the café.

The difference it has made

Conversations and connection

- The café has become a hub for learning about children's personalities, concerns, ideas.
 - It is a safe space for children to "unpack things they are worried about" and discuss what is happening in their lives – it's not all about the food, it's also about family and community connection.
- Has allowed for better quality conversations, and exploration of new topics with children as there is no need to rush. This is facilitated by the Chat Box:
 - A little box with questions in it that can be used as conversation starters.
 - This is kept in the café all the time.
 - The staff have noticed that children experiencing trauma tend to gravitate more towards the imaginative questions, so this is an important way for these children to relax, feel safe, be creative and build connections with staff and other children in a way that does not put pressure on them to think of things to say.
- Has helped to lower stress for both educators and children.
- Helps build children's language skills.
- Increases positive staff-child interactions.

Food exploration, extended learning and sensory support

- Has helped children explore new foods in a quiet, comfortable and safe environment.
 - This also supports children's foundational learning in health.
- Has led to extended experiences based on the seasons, like:
 - Bird watching – have added a bird watching book and identifying birds in the garden.
 - Cultural understanding and geography – have added a flag book and children identify which flags belong to which people in the service.
 - Looking at bugs and insects that are around and learning about them.
- The café has now expanded to the Pom Pom Lounge that is a soft place to rest outside.
 - It contains a large fish tank with fairies and books called Pom Pom Fairy World.
 - This space is perfect for a break from the playground, without having to move back inside – a gap recognised by staff through careful observation.
 - Can be used by all children, especially those who may have sensory needs, trauma, or are just tired and need a break.

What next?

Next, they may create some chat box cards that only have pictures and allow children to create a story from the pictures – this is especially useful for children who aren't yet reading.

Top tips

- "You don't need funds to start it, just the courage to jump".
- You will be "astounded by how competent and capable children are".
- Start with a trial.
- Begin with a checklist to mark off who has eaten and include parental requests, etc from the start.
- Include parent, staff and child feedback in the process.
- There will be bumps, but it is definitely worth trying this kind of system for mealtimes – "everyone loves it!"

Child initiated play

When children lead food-related play

In early childhood education, rich and meaningful learning experiences are often driven through child-led play and inquiry.

Making meaning through play

When children initiate food-related play, they are making sense of their lived experiences and drawing connections to new understandings. They are transferring what they know between different contexts, figuring out what it all means to them.

The educator's role in child-led food play

The role of the educator is to be responsive, to observe emerging interests and the focus of the play. In these instances, educators listen and observe closely, and use

what they notice to offer subtle, intentional additions of materials, language or ideas that extend the play, without taking over its direction. What they notice in these moments also becomes the basis for future planning.

These subtle but intentional inputs empower children to be the leaders of their learning as they use play to build meaning from their own experiences. When food is provided in a familiar and meaningful context for their learning, positive connections and associations are strengthened.

Child-led food play in action

The following examples in practice provide a snapshot of child-led play scenarios with food and ways educators might scaffold and extend their learning.

A baby watches peers and educators during feeding time. They begin to mimic what they see by attempting to hold a spoon, banging their cup on the tray, dropping food and trying to bring objects to their mouth.

Educator observes: The baby watching others closely during mealtime and attempting to copy their actions through repetitive exploration.

Intentional input:

- Introduce mirror play during feeding to allow children to see themselves eating.
- Model language through external dialogue "I scoop my yoghurt". [See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 5, page 42](#)
- Introduce foods and utensils with differing textures to add sensory variation.

The children in a toddler's room are engaging in pretend cooking play with sand, mud, water and leaves. They mix 'ingredients' to make cakes and compare textures and make changes by adding more water or sand. They sing Happy Birthday to each other and blow out their pretend candles.

Educator observes: Children engaging in sensory exploration and testing theories by adding more water and sand to their mixture

Intentional input:

- Add more utensils, containers and fresh herbs to the play area to extend sensory exploration.
- Model rich language such as pours, mix, thick, watery, sticky.

Educator observes: Children engaging in symbolic play and social rituals when singing Happy Birthday and blowing out candles.

Intentional input:

- Read books about birthdays and how families celebrate special occasions to broaden cultural understanding.
- Include cake tin/muffin tray, recipe cards and pictures of cakes to the sand play area as a link to real-world experiences.

After a recent excursion to a community farm the children in the preschool room have been playing with blocks and animal figurines to create their own farms. Some children used the blocks to create enclosures for their animals. While others used the figurines to engage in dramatic play, taking on the role of farmers and animals.

Educator observes: Children creating fenced areas and grouping their animals intentionally (schema play).

Intentional input:

- Add other farm-related food items such as fruit and vegetables, along with enclosure material such as magnet tiles and sticks, to deepen children's symbolic and representational play.
- Model positional language during play such as beside, next to, inside, outside, between.

Educator observes: Children engaging in dramatic play by taking on the role of animals to act out their recent experience at the farm.

Intentional input:

- Add open-ended material such as loose parts to extend children's imaginative and symbolic thinking.
- Add photographs of the children on the excursion to the block area to deepen their connection to real-life experiences.
- Model narrative language "the farmer is feeding the cows" and farm-specific vocabulary: paddock, harvest, barn.

In a mixed age setting, older children are engaging in dramatic play in the home corner where they are preparing meals and serving food to others. The younger children are watching and imitating their actions by mixing, carrying bowls and offering food to dolls, peers and educators.

Educator observes: Children engaging in play that mirrors home-like experiences including negotiating social roles and mimicking cultural practices.

Intentional input:

- Invite children to engage in 'cooking' using salt-dough to add food props to the home corner, deepening the connection between dramatic play and the real world.
- Add family photos to the home corner to deepen the connection between the care setting and home.
- Introduce real-life materials that reflect diverse family structures, cultures and traditions, helping children to see themselves represented.

Educator observes: Children closely watching one another with older children modelling and younger children imitating.

Intentional input:

- Invite the older children to act as 'mealtime mentors' for the younger children. Here they take on the role of the 'adult' in serving, engaging with and supporting younger children during mealtimes to extend older children's leadership and younger children's imitation.

Educator observes: Younger children engaging in early symbolic play where they are using pretend items to represent lived experiences and ideas.

Intentional input:

- Sit alongside children and narrate their play, "You're making some food for your friends", "Oh, the pie is still hot".
- Include mealtime rituals into the space, such as singing a familiar song or wiping the table, to deepen children's connection between play and real-life experiences.
- Add small containers for filling and emptying or water alongside cooking play to support sensory exploration and symbolic representation.

SECTION 2

Cooking and Food Preparation Experiences



Cooking and food preparation experiences

Within ECEC settings, cooking and food preparation experiences can provide children with opportunities to enhance their learning, development and wellbeing.

By allowing children to engage in cooking and food preparation, educators can support learning and development across multiple areas of the EYLF.

Experiences versus activities

Both experiences and activities play crucial roles in ECEC, but they have distinct characteristics.

Activities are planned, intentional, structured, focus on skill development and are guided by the educator (e.g. games, play-based small group work).³

Experiences on the other hand are holistic (consider and respond to various aspects of child development), are often child-led, and provide real world context by providing ongoing opportunities for children to be curious explorers in their everyday environment.³ Experiences can often be spontaneous (by following a child's lead) and incorporate broader societal themes such as cultural diversity (e.g. seeing how other cultures prepare food).

With this difference in mind, cooking and food preparation sit firmly within the category of experiences and are among the richest available to children in ECEC settings.

Developmentally and contextually appropriate experiences refer to intentional, appropriate experiences that engage young children in the safe preparation of food. These are designed to support holistic development and child agency through sensory-rich, hands-on learning that integrates physical, social, cognitive and emotional domains^{3,4,5}, underpinned by an appropriate risk assessment (including individual child needs such as food allergies). Early involvement in food preparation experiences can also support development of food literacy skills such as confidence with kitchen equipment, food preparation and knowledge about foods including where foods come from.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 2, Outcome 3,
Outcome 4, Outcome 5

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA5

Reflective questions



Educators

- How do you currently involve children in planning cooking and food preparation experiences? Can you think of more opportunities to include their voice and input?
- Have you completed the relevant food safety and allergen management training? Do you feel confident applying that knowledge during cooking and food preparation experiences with children?
- How does your service support new staff to build risk awareness around food and cooking experiences during induction? Is this revisited as part of ongoing professional development?

Service leadership team

- How do you ensure staff have the skills, confidence and support to safely lead cooking and food preparation experiences with children? How would you know if a staff member didn't feel confident and what could you do about it?

Supporting learning and development through cooking and food preparation experiences

Fun and engaging cooking and food preparation experiences can support children's holistic learning and development in many ways, including:

Physical development

- Improving fine motor skills.⁵
- Providing opportunities for children to use all senses through engagement, exploration, explanation, extension and evaluation.⁴

Numeracy, literacy and science skills

- Measuring and counting ingredients builds early number sense and an understanding of quantity.^{4,6}
- Reading and following a recipe together builds vocabulary and understanding of sequence and process.^{5,6}
- Tasting, observing and predicting what will happen builds curiosity and encourages children to make discoveries about the world around them.⁴

Confidence and pride

- Supporting curiosity and confidence when completing hands-on tasks.⁴
- Fostering a sense of pride in achievements.^{4,5}

Promoting environmental sustainability awareness and eco-citizenship

- Nurturing and supporting young children to be engaged eco-citizens through understanding how food is linked to the environment.⁷
- Beginning to build an understanding of where food comes from (e.g. plants, animals), including agriculture, local foods, and seasonality.⁸

Socio-cultural awareness

- Encouraging cultural understanding.⁵
- Encouraging collaboration with their peers.⁵

Food safety and hygiene

- Understanding basic food hygiene principles such as washing hands before cooking, tying hair back and wearing an apron.
- Learning how to handle foods safely such as using tongs, clean utensils, awareness of keeping certain foods hot or cold and separating raw and cooked food.

Fostering further learning and development

Cooking and food preparation experiences naturally support children's social and cognitive development. They involve social interaction, and they sit right at the edge of what a child can do alone and what they can do with a bit of support, which is exactly where children learn best (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, as cited in Barry & King, 1998).⁹

In addition to the preparation and cooking skills developed during cooking experiences, participating children:

- Are more likely to consume foods such as fruits and vegetables.^{10,11,12}

[See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 3, page 31](#)

- Develop collaboration and teamwork skills.
- Develop social-emotional, cognitive, communication, and empathy skills.

Understanding why cooking and food preparation experiences matter is the foundation. The following section focuses on how to bring them to life safely, confidently and well, covering what service leaders, educators and families each need to know.

COOKING AND FOOD PREPARATION EXPERIENCES

Preparing and planning

Thorough planning and preparation for cooking and food preparation experiences ensures that these experiences are safe for all children and staff, run smoothly and are fun for everyone involved. Planning requires support from service leaders, time allocated to staff who are planning, delivering and supervising the experience, and clear communication with families.

→ **Service Leader's Perspective**

→ **Educator's Perspective**

Supporting cooking – service leader's perspective

Service leaders play an important role in encouraging and supporting staff to plan and prepare cooking and food preparation experiences.

Key considerations

- Keep communication open.
- Ensure staff are involved in the planning of the experience.
- Support staff to build their skills, training and agency.
- Allow staff plenty of time to plan and prepare.
- Ensure the experience is carried out in a safe way for all children and staff involved.

Staff engagement and communication

- Talk to staff and ask about what they are confident doing, time constraints, what they would like to do, etc.
- Get to know staff knowledge, skills, strength and agency around cooking.
- Allocate time for cooks to work with the children – cooks hold a wealth of knowledge and skills that add richness to these experiences and can also enhance their engagement in the service.
- Build engagement with the cook by explaining the intention of the cooking experience and involving the cook in the planning of cooking and food preparation experience – this will also ensure that there has been good communication between educators and cooks and alignment with the planned menu.

Staff involvement

- Involve staff in selecting experiences as there will be more buy-in if they are part of the process.
- Cooking and food preparation experiences may be new for some educators, so it's important to meet them where they are at. For example, if an educator is not feeling confident about running the experience, find something simple to start with.

Support and agency

- Ensure staff know the service leader is there to support them.
- Ask staff – What would make you feel comfortable? What do you need from me?
- Guide staff until they are confident they can carry out the experience themselves.
- Provide peer support for the experience if needed.
- Allocate leadership roles for those with most interest and high cooking ability.

Planning

- Have flexibility with options as there may not be time to upskill staff or backfill with other staff.
- Allow staff time to prepare for activities and experiences.
- Have a standard procedure for running cooking experiences for all staff.
- For large centres, a roster for cooking experiences can share the load amongst educators.

Training

- Seek training for those who are interested in facilitating these experiences but have no experience or limited ability.

Food safety awareness, assessment and management

- Ensure food safety management practices are in place and a risk assessment has been conducted. More information can be found from the ACECQA website.
- Educators must complete food safety training (such as DoFoodSafely, FoodSafe Online or I'm Alert Food Safety Training) before commencing any cooking or food preparation experiences.

Food allergen management

- Ensure all staff have completed **All About Allergens for Childhood Education and Care (CEC)** training in the last 12 months.
- Ensure all staff have training about other special dietary needs relevant to the children in the service.
- Communicate with staff regarding the food allergies and intolerances of children at the service.
- Ensure the cooking experience is safe for all children to participate, including those with food allergies.

Policy and procedures

- Make sure policy and procedures are in place.
- Adhere to supervisor ratios at all times.

Playing with food can be an ethical and sustainability concern, as it may contribute to food waste and be insensitive to cultural values and socioeconomic circumstances, particularly for children who may be experiencing food insecurity.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA4, QA7

Planning and delivering – educator's perspective

Cooking and food preparation experiences are a great way to help children develop new skills and explore their world. Planning and preparation are key to ensuring these experiences are safe for all children and staff involved, run smoothly and that children get the most out of them.

Planning involves deciding what, when, and how. Preparing involves getting the space, equipment and ingredients ready. Delivering involves facilitating the experience itself.

1 Planning

Planning the experience

- Plan where the experience will be run, what will be done, what will be needed:
 - Have a clear aim and learning outcomes.
 - Spontaneous experiences are also possible and can be documented and evaluated afterwards. These may be more common in smaller services.
- Communicate with families well beforehand if their child has food allergies. Ideally, the food prepared will be safe for all children, including those with food allergy.
- Organise children into small groups of 4–5.
- Depending on resources available, it may be possible to have all the same type and colour of equipment for children, which can reduce the choice of tools taking over the experience. Alternatively, having a variety of options provides a child a sense of agency and opportunity to build resilience.
 - It can be a valuable learning opportunity in itself to discuss that there are only X number of blue bowls and this time they didn't get their first choice, but they can choose a green or red one instead.
- Plan for an experience to take at least double the time to complete than stated on the recipe.

Collaboration and communication with the cook

Communication and collaboration with the service cook is crucial to ensure the smooth running of activities and experiences. Consider asking the cook to run cooking experiences as they hold a wealth of knowledge and skills which add richness and can broaden their involvement in the service.

- Where possible give the cooks at least one week's notice before a cooking or food preparation experience so they can prepare anything that is needed:
 - This will depend on size of the centre and number of children – larger services may need to give more notice to the cook.
 - For food allergies: cooks usually have processes in place for food allergen management, and they will have tools and templates for allergens and suitable alternatives for ingredients – utilise their knowledge and experience to help ensure the experience is safe for all children involved.
- Give the cook notice if kitchen equipment is needed.
- Understand the intention of the experience and communicate this to the cook if collaborating.
- Communicate clearly with the cook on the day of the experience, including what will be prepared, and when, to ensure food preparation is not doubled up. Clear communication will prevent this from happening and allow kitchen planning to be amended for the day to reduce waste.

1 Planning (continued)

Collaboration and communication with other educators

- Discuss the experience with the team and incorporate other non-food learning experiences during the day that align with the recipe or ingredients being prepared, for example stories, songs and crafting experiences.
- Discuss with other staff members involved about what will be happening so everyone is prepared.
- Communicate clearly – talk through specific movements so if another staff member needs to step in temporarily, this can be facilitated.

Collaboration and communication with children

- Where possible, involve children in choosing what to cook – this supports child agency and builds investment in the experience.
- Allow children choice when they are involved in cooking. This can include involving children in food selection to take their preferences into account.
- Children with food allergy should not be responsible for checking or managing the safety of their food – this is the responsibility of the adults caring for them. Their preferences should still be sought and accommodated with safe options.
- Offer a variety of ingredients to support curiosity and sensory exploration. Encourage interest in food through stress free experiences – it could be a sensory experience, rather than an eating experience.
- Allow time for feedback from children regarding how they felt about the experience.

Considerations

- Take into account any diverse needs that children may have, for example sensory processing accommodations.
- Take into account any dietary restrictions. Ensure all staff have training about special dietary needs relevant to the children in the service.
- Take into account, or avoid, potentially hazardous ingredients that require training to handle safely – such as raw whole eggs, raw meats, etc. (anything that has bacteria on it that will cross-contaminate surfaces).
- The National Allergy Council recommends that ECEC services do not rely on volunteers to care for children with food allergy in this setting.

Food allergen awareness

- Include food allergies in the initial risk management assessment.
- Discuss plans for any cooking experience with families in the early planning stages – aim for safe inclusion.
- Ensure all staff have completed the **All about Allergens for CEC** training in the last 12 months.
- Communicate with all staff involved regarding the food allergies and intolerances of children participating in the experience.
- Allergens and dietary requirements should be known and accommodated.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 3

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA4, QA6

2 Preparing

Environment

- Clean the area where the cooking or food preparation experience will take place. Use warm water and detergent and a clean cloth/sponge that is only used for food preparation areas.
- Ensure the physical environment is safe. Surfaces should be clean and dry, hazardous equipment stored out of reach, and the space adequate for the group size.
- Keep cooking experience ingredients in a separate area from general food preparation ingredients.

Equipment

- Prepare all equipment beforehand.
- Allocate separate equipment that can be used out of the kitchen which will not affect the cook's ability to prepare regular meals.

Ingredients

- Add additional ingredients for the cooking experience on the food order/purchasing list.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA3



3 Delivering

- Plan for small groups rotating through the experience for better supervision, improved safety, and best experience for children and staff.
- Ensure appropriate supervision of children throughout the cooking or food preparation experience by maintaining correct ratios at all times.
- Clearly explain expectations for the experience to children before you start.
- Be flexible as plans may need to be adapted throughout.

Engaging families

- Ask families to volunteer to run or assist with cooking experiences at the service:
- Ask families to provide a Working with Children Check prior to conducting the session. Refer to your state or territory Working With Children guidelines regarding parent volunteer requirements. Ensure adherence to the child safe standards and follow the service's policies and procedures around child safety and safeguarding.
- If they agree to run a session, ask families to provide the service with a list of ingredients and equipment necessary for the session they will run, in addition to the recipe that will be used.
- Inform families whether any food allergens/intolerances/food preferences will need to be considered.
- Speak with families prior to running the session and ask if there are any special requirements.
 - Ask staff for assistance with supervision while running the session.
- Get families involved via open-door sessions or invite them to join meals at the service. If the service has an open-door policy, parents can come in at any time and can eat with the children if they come at mealtimes.
- Ask families to contribute ingredients e.g. a vegetable for a mixed vegetable soup.
- Share menus with families.
- Include cultural elements on the menu – e.g. write on the menu in the language that the dish comes from.
 - 📖 See Case study, page 104 of this module
- Communicate with families regarding a child's likes/dislikes, food allergies and other dietary requirements.
- On Country experiences – invite families to lead children on a walk on Country to share knowledge and experience of traditional bush foods. Remember to label all foods provided for children to try, and to be mindful of food allergies and intolerances.
 - 📖 See Case study, page 102 of this module
- On Country food – ask families to bring in special ingredients to talk about with the children.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 2, Outcome 3,
Outcome 4, Outcome 5

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA4, QA6

CASE STUDY

Connecting education to real life

The mini-chef experience

2

Cooking and Food
Preparation Experiences

SERVICE	Montessori Minds Childcare
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	1 to 6 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	127
NUMBER OF STAFF	35–40
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Geelong, Victoria



Background

Montessori Minds Childcare is a relatively new service in Victoria, which has been in operation for around two and a half years. The centre serves a highly diverse and vulnerable area and plays an important role in education and support for the whole community.

The building was designed with the aim of creating a learning environment where sustainability, food education, cultural inclusion, and community engagement were embedded into daily practice rather than treated as stand-alone programs or events.

The Montessori philosophy underpins all learning experiences, emphasising real-world connections, practical life skills, observation, and respect for living things. This approach creates an inclusive environment where learning flows between the centre, families, and the wider community.

The weekly cooking experiences with the centre chef play a part in that flow of learning to the home. Children bring cooking skills and knowledge learned at the centre back to their families – everyone learns and enjoys!

What did you want to do?

- Both the centre director and owner wanted to help children develop practical cooking skills while they were at the centre.
 - Practical cooking experiences help children build independence, confidence and everyday life skills.
 - They support fine motor development, concentration and early maths and science concepts through measuring, pouring, mixing and following steps.
 - Cooking also encourages confidence and curiosity with food, language development and a sense of contribution as children take part in meaningful real-life tasks.
- One way to do this was through hands-on cooking experiences with the chef.
- This would also allow children the opportunity to develop skills that they could use throughout life, and even bring them into their family homes.

What did you do?

- Chef-led cooking experiences were integrated into the program at the service.
- It was decided that these experiences would be 'no fire cooking' to reduce risk.
- Chef experiences are used with the three- to five-year-old children at the centre.
- The children cook every week with the chef, as part of the program.
 - Smoothies are a favourite, with many parents reporting that the children have been able to remember the recipe to re-create the smoothies at home.
- Children also collect herbs from the centre's garden to use in the chef experiences, supporting sensory learning and food literacy.

The difference it has made

- Learning has extended into homes, with families reporting that children are increasingly leading cooking at home.
 - Parents have reported that children often want to re-create the food they have made at the service at home, and lead the way with creating a shopping list to buy the ingredients.
- Children have also built strong social skills, confidence and collaboration through play and cooking experiences with the centre chef.

Top tips

Use real-world activities and experiences wherever possible to create rich learning experiences for children.

Through real-world cooking experiences, children at Montessori Minds are learning all about food and cooking, building confidence and skills that will benefit them, and their families, throughout life.

These experiences also create opportunities to explore cultural foods and family traditions, strengthening children's sense of identity, belonging and respect for diversity, while inviting valuable parent involvement.

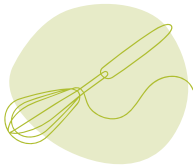
Most importantly, cooking experiences are planned around the rights, interests and wellbeing of children, ensuring their safety, voice and enjoyment remain central at all times.

COOKING AND FOOD PREPARATION EXPERIENCES

Developing and delivering – ideas, procedures and prompts for planning

Cooking and food preparation ideas

This section contains four tables with food preparations and cooking ideas from four different perspectives:



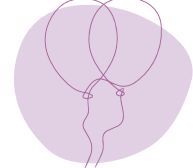
Resources and equipment available



Budget



Educator cooking skills



Developmental stage of the child

Use these tables as ideas to get started, then use the **standard operating procedure template** and the **practice questions** that follow to create food preparation and cooking experiences tailored to the ECEC service where they will be used. Remember it's important to consider food safety, including food allergies and anaphylaxis, when planning all cooking and food preparation experiences.

Strategies

Risk assessment

- Ensure a thorough risk assessment, including food allergies, is completed before the experience begins. Risk assessment should also include, for example: what materials are being used and if they are developmentally appropriate, introducing safe use of equipment before using (e.g. teaching children how to hold a peeler or a knife safely), ensuring compliance with local food safety and council requirements, hygiene practices and cultural inclusion.
- Ensure medical and dietary management plans are in place and communicated to all staff involved in the experience.
- Use an allergen matrix and create placemats or allergen cards for educators to use during the experience.
- Compost that contains manure might not be suitable for young children to handle, unless you gear them up with the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements stated on the packaging (e.g. gloves, mask).

Planning, time and resources

- Ensure enough time is allocated to research recipe and resources needed to create experience.
- Ensure enough time for preparation of the experience and actual learning outcomes that are to be the focus.
- Use pictorial recipes that include pictures of equipment and ingredients needed as well as pictures of each step – this will help children to understand and remember what they have to do next.

Supervision and group management

- Support colleagues in the delivery of the experience and with supervision.
- Follow the procedure prepared for the experience step by step.

- Make small to medium groups of 4-5 children at a time for the experience – smaller groups lead to a better cooking experience for both staff and children as supervision can be maintained and children can get the assistance they need to learn the new skills.
- Give some instructions to staff and children on timing of the experience.
- Give children recipes – step by step.
- Create a culture that invites learning not just for the children, but also for staff – make resources easy to understand and make no assumptions about what staff might know.

Planning and organising experiences

These are some experiences that require no to minimal equipment and can be prepared in any type of service. Examples include sorting fruits and vegetables and involving children in menu planning.

- Sorting food into colours.
- Sorting fruit into sizes and shapes.
- Colour grouping and counting of vegetables/fruits to incorporate mathematics, then tasting the foods.
- Allowing children to have input into menu planning.
- Including children in planning for celebrations.
- Making fruit skewers (using paddle pop sticks) in sorting patterns.

For children with sensory needs, touching food with their hands may cause undue stress.

Instead, the child may be more comfortable touching the food with a fork or tongs. Alternatively, an educator could sit next to the child who may prefer to instruct the educator how to sort or move the food.

This way, the educator can do the manipulation of the foods if it is preferred.

The educator could also ask the child every now and again if they would like to do the sorting themselves, in case they have changed their mind and now feel comfortable with the food experience.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 2, Outcome 3,
Outcome 4, Outcome 5

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA4

TABLE 2: Cooking and food preparation ideas based on material resources

No oven, minimal to no utensils or equipment

Preparation experiences

These experiences require no specialist equipment and are easy to plan and prepare for.

- Washing fruit or vegetables
- Growing vegetables
- Spreading
- Cut up an apple cross wise to see a star hiding inside
- Chopping
- Rolling
- Peeling hard boiled eggs
- Grating
- Kneading

Cooking experiences

These are no-bake cooking ideas that just need a fridge or freezer.

Examples include no-bake foods such as fruit balls or making no cook/raw playdough.

Spreading mashed avocado on bread	Preparing simple sandwiches or wraps	Making simple dips e.g. with canned beans + yoghurt
Making a basic green salad – tearing lettuce, breaking up peas, and washing cherry tomatoes	Exploring vegetables using child safe knives and cutters such as crinkle cutters	Chopping soft fruits (banana, watermelon, kiwi, mango, pear) with child safe knives
Making fruit and custard/yogurt parfaits where children can choose the fruit they will add	Make pasta/noodles with water and flour – mix by hand, shape by hand, take home to cook	Making fruit sticks using paddle pop sticks
Making sandwich sushi using a rolling pin to roll bread slices flat, and then add ingredients and roll up like sushi	Making dough with yeast. Observe the yeast bloom in water before adding to flour to make dough. Observe the dough rising when rested	Chopping vegetables to make crudité (vegetable sticks) to dip in hummus etc. with child safe knives <i>Note: This is not a suitable experience for children under the age of 5 years due to the risk of choking</i>
Washing, tearing, assembling, shaking (e.g. dressing in jars)	“Painting” bread with olive oil using pastry brush	

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4,

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3

Kitchenette (no oven) some utensils and equipment

Preparation experiences

These experiences require basic equipment such as pouring jugs, ladles, bowls, scales for weighing, sieves for flour items/sensory mixtures.

- Mixing
- Measuring
- Pouring
- Chopping
- Blending
- Flipping (on frypan)
- Kneading
- Blending
- Beating
- Whisking
- Brushing (pastry brush)
- Spiralising an apple
- Microwaving

Cooking experiences

These are experiences that need basic kitchen utensils and equipment. Examples include pikelets and toasted sandwiches.

For 0–2 years, organise food sensory experiences or tuff tray exploration using pantry items such as flour or corn flour mixed with water and food colouring. For older children this can be extended to how these ingredients can be used for other recipes

Chopping fruits, combining with natural yogurts and blending to make smoothies, and then freezing some to create frozen icy poles, such as frozen banana pops

Quesadillas or gozleme made with base dough and filled with choice of grated cheese, spinach, corn, feta, spring onion, tomato etc. using the sandwich press

Steaming vegetable dumplings using an electric steamer

Making smoothies using portable blenders

Mixing pikelet mixture with hand operated beaters

Making and cooking flat bread using either sandwich press or electric frypan

Making frozen fruit slushies or granita using food processor to blend frozen fruit

Making recipes that need the fridge or freezer to set (e.g. juice-based jelly, chia pudding cups, panna cotta)

Making pikelets in electric frying pan

Toasted sandwiches or jaffles

Making fruit/vegetable platters

Making pita crisps using sandwich press to crisp chopped pieces of pita bread

Making bliss balls using food processor to blitz dried fruit with oats, cereal and honey

Note: Honey should not be given to children under 12 months of age

Making sweet (strawberry and ricotta on raisin bread) or savoury (tomato) bruschetta using sandwich press to toast bread

Whisking eggs to make omelettes or fritters

Making potato patties based on mashed potato and cooking them in a frypan

Making vegetable-based fritters in electric frypan

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4,

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3

Kitchen with utensils and equipment

Preparation experiences

These experiences require access to more specialist equipment such as an oven, stove and cookware.

- Baking
- Frying and sautéing
- Roasting

Cooking experiences

These are experiences that use the full range of equipment available if there is access to a kitchen. Examples include fried rice and rainbow wedges.

Scones/muffins	Mini pizzas	Cooking fried rice
Making flat breads	Use a mini frying pan or pancake maker to make pancakes	Yeast based foods like basic breads or crumpets
Make naan by mixing flour and water, then frying in frypan	Making sushi	Baking bread (e.g. rolls and scrolls)
Roasting rainbow wedges (e.g. potato, sweet potato, carrot, beetroot)	Making mini quiches using bread rolled flat as a base	Making mini frittatas using muffin trays
Creating a full paddock to plate experience for children to explore how to grow, care for foods, then create their own meal plan with the ingredients they have grown. Children will then participate in the cooking and tasting experience		Making oven baked pita crisps – brush the pita with oil and flavours (e.g. cinnamon and brown sugar for sweet; cheese and paprika for savoury)

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4,

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3

TABLE 3: Cooking and food preparation ideas based on budgetary resources

Minimal budget		
Non-food experiences		
<i>These experiences allow children to explore food at minimal cost. Examples include books with cooking stories and ingredient collages.</i>		
Non-food experiences such as food and cooking based story books, and stories that involve cooking but may not be the main focus	Wombat stew experience – reading the book, using wombat toy, pretend fire and cauldron. Add mud and all bits from the book	Making ingredient collages for recipes using picture cut outs or printed images
Making playdough as a cooking experience	Planting seeds in windowsill planter	Watching seeds grow on cotton wool
Ordering recipe method pictures	Creating fruit and vegetable rainbow collage	Utilising the home corner for food-based play experiences
Categorising pictures/photos of fruits/vegetables by colour	Online recipe sharing between families and ECEC service	

Budget recipe ideas		
Budget recipes		
<i>These experiences have some cost involved. Examples include scones and overnight oats.</i>		
Toasted sandwiches	Rice balls	Scones
Rainbow salad jars	Banana bread	Monthly home recipe day*
Tasting plates with a wider range of fruit/vegetables than usual, dips and bread	Simple overnight oats with seeds and fruit	Flat bread – this can be used to make cheesy quesadillas
Hummus or bean dip made with tinned legumes, fresh salsa	Smoothies with children selecting their fruit to add	Marshmallow snowmen for Christmas – make and send home
Pikelets – children mix wet and dry ingredients, cook/educator cooks pikelets, children get to put jam and cream after or create a sweet option using various fruit options, or a savoury option using various grated vegetables. Allow children to choose their fruit or vegetables	Air fried Anzac biscuits around Remembrance Day – children mix biscuit dough, educator puts them in the air fryer	Fried rice – the cook precooks rice, children add ingredients, cook fries it up
Johnny Cakes/damper	Zucchini fritters using garden produce	Decorating pancakes with yoghurt and fruit

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4,

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3

Extended budget

Cooking and preparation experiences if an extended budget is available

These experiences are ideal for services with an unlimited budget for cooking experiences. Examples include excursions to local markets and having a dedicated food preparation area for the children.

Engage a consultant to undertake food/cooking incursions with children and outsource cooking experiences	Set up a dedicated hands-on cooking space for groups of children to undertake cooking experiences	Make Gulab Jamun for the Hindu celebration of Diwali
Visits from different cultural groups	Bread making with use of food mixer and oven	Grazing board – food from around the world
Visit local markets and purchase produce to explore and prepare	Kitchen garden program See Section 2, page 37	Full bread making, beginning from grinding grain
Fresh pesto	Community feasts	Banquets
Purchase adaptive tools to help little hands e.g. hand operated mixers, choppers and crinkle cutters	Dedicated food preparation area for children that includes child-friendly utensils and gadgets	Have a food exploration table, offering a small food exploration or provocation, within the learning environment. It could include a selection of the food being explored, photographs or picture cards, a relevant children's book, pretend food or cooking utensils, and opportunities for children to engage in conversations, sensory exploration, dramatic play, drawing, or simple food preparation.
All recipes used are pictorial and laminated, and kept in a dedicated folder	Weekly cooking experiences for all children delivered by a dedicated and trained educator	

Budgeting strategies

- Use what is already on the menu – turn meals into make your own plate, wraps, salads.
- Use pantry staples (oats, flour, tinned vegetables).
- Use garden produce.
[See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75](#)
- Plant and harvest a small range of herbs and vegetables to use in recipes.
- Plan low-cost bulk recipes (soups, stews, muffins) that have the same ingredients as your existing menu, so you just need to extend current shopping list slightly.
- Use existing tools, repurpose bowls, jugs, spoons.
- Cooking experiences can be in existing routines, for example wash vegetables at the table with children instead of having the cook do it in the kitchen where the children may not be able to see – these are short simple tasks that fit with supervision.
- Saving parts of food for growing experiences – e.g. sprout spring onion roots, avocado seeds, carrot tops and sweet potatoes to make greens.
- Invite families to donate a vegetable or fruit to make a combined vegetable soup or fruit salad.

- Compost waste.
- Using food scraps for worm farm – creating worm juice to feed gardens and plants.

Accessibility strategies

This budget-friendly strategy may also be useful for services that struggle to access resources, even with a budget.

- Growing seeds on windowsill is a great way for children to see how a plant grows from a seed and can be used in services without extra space outdoors for a garden or garden beds.

*Food allergy awareness and food allergen management

If food has been brought in from other families' homes to share or cook with, it is not recommended that the food be consumed by a child with food allergies. The risk of unintentional cross-contamination with allergens, and an allergic reaction or anaphylaxis, is too great.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4,

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA6

TABLE 4: Cooking and food preparation ideas based on educator cooking skills

Limited cooking experience and skills		
Experiences for those with minimal cooking skills		
These experiences are ideal for all staff, including those who are beginning their cooking experience with children, to help them build their capacity for more involved cooking in the future. They include washing and sorting foods and peeling vegetables.		
Sorting experiences	Washing fruits or vegetables	Planting seeds
Role playing cooking	Pretend cooking with play dough	Singing food and cooking songs
Harvesting and handling produce from vegetables gardens <i>See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75</i>	Reading food-based or cooking stories	Making ingredient collages and recipe method sorting experiences
Using food-based resources to simulate purchasing and food preparation that is not feasible to do in real life	Food exploration experiences (e.g. corn peeling, pea podding)	Making basic fruit skewers using pop-sticks

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4,
Outcome 5

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA4

Average level of cooking experience and skills		
Experiences for those with average cooking skills		
These experiences are ideal for staff who have some experience with cooking, or who want to try something a bit more involved. They include chopping fruits and vegetables and making salads.		
Experiences with simple ingredients	Cutting up fruit and vegetables	Experiences with a cooking step
No bake recipes	Salads and wraps	Microwave toaster recipes
Basic sandwich, smoothie or parfait style food experiences	Helping children to use toddler knives	

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4,

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA3, QA4

Confident with cooking and food experiences

Experiences for those who are confident in the kitchen

See Section 2, page 37

These experiences are ideal for staff who have a lot of experience with cooking and may want to provide a greater challenge for the children. They include cooking with heat sources and using multi-staged recipes.

Baking	Leading special events	Using recipes with multiple steps
Full heat-based meals like soups, curries, fried rice	Teaching knife skills, grating or peeling skills	Dough-based experiences like rolls and scrolls
Conducting garden to table sessions <i>See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75</i>	Any experience that requires time to cook	Leading larger groups of children
Safety knives – confident educators will use these – but those that are not confident may worry that children will cut themselves	Facilitating experiences for children with multiple food allergies or other complex medical needs	Any experience that requires the handling of high-risk foods – eggs, meats, raw vegetables/fruit that has come in contact with soil. Reduce the risk by pre-cracking eggs, and pre-chopping other high-risk ingredients to minimise children's direct contact with these foods.
More complex food preparation experiences that might need adapting on the go	Any experience that requires children possibly coming in contact with a heat source	

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA4

TABLE 5: Cooking and food preparation ideas based on the developmental stage of the child

Cooking and food preparation ideas based on the developmental stage of the child

From the very beginning of planning a cooking experience, consider the developmental stage of the children involved. The cooking experience should link with current planning, experiences, calendar of events, cultural celebrations, child interests and parents as partners. Take into account any diverse needs of children that need to be catered for so that all children can participate safely in the experience.

Note: All children develop at their own rate. The age categories below are a guide only, and developmental descriptions are also provided for additional context.

Under 2 years

These experiences are suitable for children who are exploring through their senses and developing early physical, social and communication skills. They include sensory as well as exploratory experiences.

Exploring different foods and talk about their colours, shapes, smell and taste to enhance vocabulary	Mashing whole banana or cooked pumpkin in front of children so they can watch it changing, rather than serving it to them already mashed	Smelling and touching herbs and spices or watching an adult tear or chop them
Exploring safe large pieces of food like steamed carrot sticks or bread crusts	Watching an adult stir or shake a food and talk about what they are doing	Exploring bowls of dry foods e.g. different types of bread.
Joining in hand-washing songs	Patting or poking soft dough	Washing fruits and vegetables
Food exploration (e.g. banana in different forms – cut circles, sticks and mashed, passing food to put in their bowl – a piece of soft pear or watermelon, banana)		

Cooking and food preparation ideas based on the developmental stage of the child (continued)

2-3 years

These experiences are suitable for children who are building independence, language, fine-motor skills and early problem-solving abilities. They include role play and simple food preparation experiences.

Pouring ingredients	Mashing bananas or potatoes	Washing fruits and vegetables
Tearing lettuce or herbs	Kneading dough	Mashing their own soft foods
Stirring the bowl	Winding an apple spiraliser	Shaking a jar of salad dressing
Brushing with pastry brush	Sprinkling herbs and spices	Threading fruit on a pop stick
Role play using foods in everyday situations	Mixing a marinade e.g. for vegetables	Cutting soft foods with child safe knife

4 years and up

These experiences are suitable for children who are ready for greater independence, collaboration, creativity, planning and problem-solving. They include experiences that require a greater amount of fine motor skills and comprehension of danger from e.g. heat.

Rolling protein ball mixture into balls	Following simple picture recipe	Using tongs and spatulas
Role-playing 'restaurant'	Peeling boiled eggs	Shaping dough and making scrolls
Putting muffin mix into patty pans e.g. with an ice cream scoop	Spreading toppings on bread or crackers	Using graters and peelers with supervision
Counting and naming ingredients	Cracking eggs <i>Ensure children wash hands straight after cracking the eggs and before touching other foods and surfaces to avoid cross-contamination.</i>	Weighing and measuring ingredients

Promote physical literacy by demonstrating the actions needed for cooking and the language to support each movement, e.g. stirring, rolling, kneading

Support extensions of role play by including experiences, incorporating specific language, and bringing in science and mathematics such as scales, colours and measurements

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA6

Planning and delivering – standard operating procedure template

Unlike the information and guidance in the rest of this module, Table 6 is a practical planning template designed to be filled in and used directly at your service. Use it to bring together information and ideas from across this module and create cooking and food preparation experiences tailored to the children, staff and resources unique to your ECEC setting.

TABLE 6: Standard Operating Procedure Template: Cooking and Food Preparation Experiences

Pre-planning – safety first	
Safety task <i>What safety elements need to be considered</i>	- List food safety and food allergy considerations – identify children with food allergies and do not plan experiences that include their food allergen. - List any choking risks. - List other safety considerations – burn/scald risk? - Consider heat, sharps, electricity, trip hazards etc. - List any high-risk foods that can pose a food safety hazard and need to be kept cold such as meat, dairy foods and/or need to be cooked thoroughly such as raw meat and egg.
Support resources <i>What support resources are available to make decisions regarding risk</i>	- Complete a risk assessment specific to the food experience. See Section 2, page 37 - Consider utilising a risk assessment tool like the one provided on the: ⓧ ACECQA website - Complete the National Allergy Council All about Allergens for CEC online food allergen management training – The All about Allergens Kitchen Handbook is an accompanying tool for this training. - Complete the National Allergy Council – CEC Kitchen handbook checklist (pp. 38-39).¹³ - To assist with ingredient substitutions, consult the All About Allergens ingredient substitution tool.
Decision <i>State the decision on experience, adaptations or mitigations</i>	- All food-based experiences must accommodate children with food allergies. They must not include that child's food allergen. Use recipes that are easy to adapt. - Consider a risk mitigation tool. For example, if food allergies exist what alternative can be provided? If a heat source is involved, how are children protected from burns? - Decisions can be guided by the outcomes of the risk assessment tool. Consider using something like a flow chart whereby if too many risks are ticked then revert to a safer food preparation or cooking experience.
Pre-planning tasks	
Equipment	Utensils - Have the correct utensils to undertake the experience safely. - Ensure there are child accessible tools like tongs, spoons and knives. Resources - Use a pictorial equipment guide if possible. Serving and dining equipment - Ensure there is appropriate serving equipment and consumables. For example: - Use service crockery where possible to support sustainable practices, before considering the use of disposable paper plates. - Have serviettes, hand wipes and plenty of paper towels ready for messy hands. - If making taste testers use patty pans or mini sauce tubs etc. - Consider whether seating is needed for children at the tables.

Pre-planning tasks (continued)**Equipment**
*(continued)***Cleaning**

- Ensure there is appropriate cleaning equipment – bench cloths, paper towels, tub of soapy water if no kitchen sink or at least have a separate tub to place dirty dishes.
- If using a tub of soapy water to wash dishes, this should then be followed up when possible with proper washing and sanitising before the equipment is used again.

Food wastage

- Scraps bowl – save food scraps for worm farm and compost.
- Ensure there is a disposal bin, including for recyclables.

Ingredients**Food allergen management**

- Remember to first consider which children are participating in the experience – these could include children with specific dietary needs or food allergies, diverse support needs and abilities that need to be considered.
- Check all ingredients within an experience including the precautionary allergen labelling.
- List all of the allergens using a food allergen matrix. If a child with a food allergy is present (considering children attending each day) then that allergen should not be present at all in the experience.
- Any ingredient substitutions must be considered against the allergen matrix.
- Create a standard recipe to be used for the experience.

Food safety

- Food safety – take note of high-risk ingredients and the time they are left in the temperature danger zone (5–60°C).¹⁴

Ingredient preparation

- Consider which foods children will be allowed to engage with (for example touching, smelling, tasting).
- Check ingredient quantities – will the dish form a meal or is it just for a taste test?
- Consider which ingredients will be allowed, how will they be presented on the table, etc.
- Consider whether any ingredients need to be pre-prepared – e.g. chopped or peeled, to help make the cooking experience easier and less stressful.
- Consider how children will access the ingredients to ensure all children can participate.
- Consider whether ingredients will be set out in pre-measured quantities.

Budget

- Seek low cost, home brand, ingredients. Consider substitutions for in-season produce.

Location

- Consider where the experience will be run?
- Consider the cleanliness of the location for the experience (e.g. not in the paint room) and ease of cleaning afterwards.
- Avoid planning food experiences in carpeted areas.
- Consider if there needs to be access to electricity and water.
- Consider whether there is enough room for ingredients/equipment and tables for food preparation.

Pre-planning tasks (continued)**Group management and supervision during the cooking or food preparation experience****Food allergen management**

- Anybody with a diagnosed food allergy is to be considered.

Physical safety

- Allow time for children to wash their hands before and after the experience.
- Keep the number of children to a maximum of four or five for the experience.
 - Consideration needs to be given as to how the experience is made available for all children in the room – thought must be put into the amount of time and the opportunity for all children to participate.
- Consider the specific steps that the children will be undertaking. Consider whether the children will be observing or actively participating, and whether other children will be allowed to watch.
- Consider number of children, their age and development.
- Ensure adequate supervision – extra hands to help children may be needed.
- Define child tasks and educator only tasks for cooking experiences. For example, using the electric frypan may be an educator task.
- List down the possible things that can potentially go wrong/not go according to plan, then how to adapt/or terminate if the experience can no longer be carried out safely.
 - Develop a quick scenario sheet – if experience hasn't gone to plan, this is what to do.

Staff experience and experience familiarity

- Consider the experience level of educators to supervise the experience.
- Consider the confidence of educators to safely undertake the task.
 - When planning the experience, discuss with the staff who will be present at the time to gauge their confidence and discuss any concerns.
- Test the standard operating procedure (SOP) – either by physically making the recipe or getting someone to duplicate the SOP. Educators should pre-test recipes before undertaking cooking experiences to increase their confidence in the delivery of the experience.
- Ideally have a lead educator who is tasked with coordination of cooking experiences. This can also help new educators learn how to carry them out in the future.
- Building a culture of these experiences ensures everyone is on board and any decisions in SOPs are properly communicated to all staff and family members involved.

Preparation**Physical cleaning****Cleaning**

- Clean food contact surfaces with soap and water before cooking.
- Disinfect tap handles regularly throughout the day.
- Ensure clean utensils and equipment are used for the experience.
- Keep a cloth and soapy water nearby.

Equipment

- Prepare waste management before cooking – have food waste, recycling and landfill bins nearby and ready for use.
- Ensure there is a dustpan and brush nearby for clean up after the experience.
- Ensure there is a mop and bucket to clean up after cooking.
- Ensure there are clean tables for ingredients and for children to prepare food.

Ingredients gathering

- Gather all ingredients before the cooking experience begins.
- Double check for allergens.
- Pre-prepare and pre-measure as needed.

Produce preparation

- Ask food handlers to pre-cook high-risk foods, such as raw meat.

Delivery	
Professional practice	Demonstrate the experience or work through each step together with the children.
Hygiene	- Ensure children have washed their hands with soap and water before, during (if needed) and after the experience: - The Happy birthday song is a good length song for children to sing while washing hands to ensure proper hand-washing length and procedure. - Drying hands with a paper towel or air dryer is crucial (not on pants!). - Use aprons – for staff and children. - Ensure hair is tied back. - Ensure floppy sleeves are pulled back. - Monitor nose picking, coughing and sneezing and remind children about preventing the spread of germs. - In these cases, access to hand -washing facilities, tissues and hand sanitiser is essential before the child cooks. - Clean up spills quickly to avoid cross-contamination.
Eating the prepared food	Remember to keep children safe, sitting down, and use right food to right child protocols if food allergy is involved. This is important as adverse events occur when things that are out of the ordinary routine are happening as children might be excited and staff might be distracted.
Pack down	
Physical cleaning	- Clean surfaces and wash utensils, especially if used for serving later. - Repack the equipment ready for next time. Consider a separate cooking equipment kit/tub for cooking experiences to prevent using kitchen equipment that is needed by the cook/chef.
Hygiene	Children must wash and dry hands properly.
Reflection	- Plan → Do → Act – What went well, what would I do differently? Please see Prompts for Planning for more ideas. - When reflecting, remember to evaluate each stage of the experience to ensure a more productive experience in the future. - Would we do it again with the same children? Was this too simple/too complex? - Include a self-evaluation section for staff, and an evaluation section for children where they can have a say about the experience.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA4

COOKING AND FOOD PREPARATION EXPERIENCES

Risk awareness, common risk factors and safety

Risk awareness

This section of the FE module aims to provide support and guidance with respect to risk awareness only in relation to cooking and food preparation experiences, not risk assessment or management. For information on risk assessment and management, please see the [ACECQA website](#).

For more information on Standard 3.3.1 Food Safety Programs for Food Service to Vulnerable Persons, visit the FSANZ website:

🔗 [Food safety for vulnerable people](#)

What is meant by risk awareness, risk assessment and risk management

For the purpose of the Best Practice Guide, the following definitions are used:

Risk awareness: Knowledge of the sorts of foods and food handling practices that can cause harm to children.

Risk assessment: Identify potential food safety and physical hazards in association with any cooking and food preparation experiences with children.

Risk management: Apply practices that avoid exposure to hazards in line with the centre Food Safety Program.

Using training and knowledge to support cooking and food preparation experiences

By following the relevant policies and regulations, and completing the correct training, outlined below, cooking and food preparation experiences can be carried out safely for all children and staff involved.

Policy and regulations

- Safe food handling and hygiene practices in ECEC are supported under Regulation 77 and Element 2.1.2.^{15,16}
- If a service provides potentially hazardous food, they must have a food safety supervisor.
 - Additional food safety requirements may vary across states and territories.
 - Please check the requirements of your specific state or territory.
 - Remember to review service policies and procedures to ensure they align with your relevant state and territory requirements.

Training

- It is recommended that all staff planning, preparing and supervising meals and food-based experiences for children with food allergy have completed the All about Allergens for Children's Education and Care online food allergen management training.
- Free, introductory food safety training (such as DoFoodSafely, FoodSafe Online and I'm Alert Food Safety Training) can support staff induction and refresher learning.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA7

Risk awareness: considerations

Table 7 is a good starting point for considering risk in cooking and food preparation experiences. Note, however, that there are additional elements to be aware of when considering risks when coordinating cooking and food preparation experiences depending on service context, children attending and location.

Factor these into any planning and risk assessment, along with the elements in Table 8 (over page), to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for children and staff.

TABLE 7: Risk awareness considerations for cooking and food preparation experiences

Risk awareness	Additional points								
 Risk factors Risk differs based on various factors relevant to each service and planned experience	Risk factors include: <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Food safety</td><td>The safe preparation and storage of food to avoid bacterial growth and cross-contamination.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Food allergy</td><td>Foods to which a child may have an allergic reaction, including anaphylaxis.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Space</td><td>The location of the cooking and food preparation experience, hazard reduction, as well as space for storage of food and equipment.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Harm to children and educators</td><td>Physical harm due to allergen exposure, dangerous use of equipment or inappropriate spaces for these experiences.</td></tr> </table>	Food safety	The safe preparation and storage of food to avoid bacterial growth and cross-contamination.	Food allergy	Foods to which a child may have an allergic reaction, including anaphylaxis.	Space	The location of the cooking and food preparation experience, hazard reduction, as well as space for storage of food and equipment.	Harm to children and educators	Physical harm due to allergen exposure, dangerous use of equipment or inappropriate spaces for these experiences.
Food safety	The safe preparation and storage of food to avoid bacterial growth and cross-contamination.								
Food allergy	Foods to which a child may have an allergic reaction, including anaphylaxis.								
Space	The location of the cooking and food preparation experience, hazard reduction, as well as space for storage of food and equipment.								
Harm to children and educators	Physical harm due to allergen exposure, dangerous use of equipment or inappropriate spaces for these experiences.								
 Risk levels Consider the risk level of a planned cooking experience and modify the plan to reduce risk and potential harm to children and educators	Risk levels can be defined as follows:  Minor risk: Unlikely to cause long-term problems.¹⁷ The chance of occurrence is unlikely, and the potential impact is low.^{17,18} It can be handled through routine maintenance or normal supervision.  Moderate risk: Could possibly or be likely to occur, with a moderate to significant impact.¹⁸ These risks require planned mitigation because they could lead to noticeable injuries or minor medical attention.¹⁷  Significant risk: If it occurs, it can carry severe consequences, such as serious injury, long-term harm, or death.¹⁸ Will require thorough planning and close supervision by staff.¹⁷ Different recipe elements can impact the risk level of a risk factor. For example: Risk factor: Food safety Risk Level: Minor  A minor risk for food safety would be using a recipe requiring food items with a long shelf life do not need to be cooked or refrigerated, e.g. flour, sugar, dry pasta. Risk factor: Harm to children Risk level: Moderate  A moderate risk for harm to children would be choosing a recipe that requires the use of utensils, such as child-safe cutlery for chopping. Risk factor: Food allergy Risk level: Significant  A significant risk for food allergy would be using a recipe that contains the allergen of a child present at the service on the day of the cooking experience – in this case, it is recommended that a different experience is considered, or the experience is modified so that all children prepare a food that is suitable for the child with food allergy.								
Risk needs to be considered from the planning stage onwards and evaluated once the experience is completed	Risk assessment is a circular process, involving planning, evaluating, learn from experience, and improving next time. Risks that come up during the experience should be added into the evaluation at the end.								

Risk awareness	Additional points
Always consider what support, tools and resources are available	Regulations Specific requirements as outlined in the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2012 are relevant and must be considered for cooking and food preparation experiences in ECEC¹⁶: • Regulation 77. Health, hygiene and safe food practices. • Regulation 78. Food and beverages. • Regulation 79. Service providing food and beverages. The Education and Care Service National Law requires approved providers and nominated supervisors to take reasonable precautions to protect children from harm or hazard likely to cause injury (Section 167 – Offence relating to protection of children from harm and hazard). These requirements apply directly when planning and delivering cooking and food preparation experiences with children, alongside any state or territory food safety laws that apply to the service. EYLF The EYLF v2.0¹⁹ provides the curriculum planning foundation for food education and cooking experiences, with intentionally planned cooking experiences able to support children's learning across multiple outcomes, particularly Outcome 3 (children have a strong sense of wellbeing), Outcome 4 (children are confident and involved learners), Outcome 5 (children are effective communicators) and others. NQS The National Quality Standard (NQS) provides the quality framework for planning and reflecting on food education experiences, with cooking experiences connecting across Quality Area 1 (intentional curriculum planning, Elements 1.1.1 and 1.1.2), Quality Area 2 (health, safety and healthy eating, Elements 2.1.2 and 2.1.3), Quality Area 3 (the physical environment supports exploration and competence, Element 3.2.2) and Quality Area 6 (collaborative partnerships with families and communities through culturally connected food experiences, Element 6.1.2).²⁰ Organisation documents Remember to consult the policies and procedures at the service while planning cooking and food preparation experiences. Staff expertise • Centres who provide potentially hazardous food must have a Food Safety Supervisor (FSS). It is recommended that the FSS is included in the planning process. • In WA, FDC educators need a food handler's certificate, but can share a FSS between centres and ask that person for information and support. Equipment • Consider what equipment is available for cooking and food preparation experiences at the service. • Consider having a separate cooking experience tub in the kitchen or in each room with some basic ingredients and equipment to make preparation easier when a food preparation experience is coming up, and to support spontaneous experiences. Support • Ask for support from the service leaders at the service when planning cooking experiences. • Ask for support and gather permission from parents before undertaking a cooking experience.

Risk awareness	Additional points
Consider the publicly available resources that could assist with the risk assessment for any planned cooking experiences	⊗ <u>ACECQA</u> Provides guidance on food safety requirements under the NQF, including resources on keeping children's food safe and creating positive food environments. It can be used to inform the risk assessment process for any planned cooking experience. ACECQA also provides guidance and resources for risk assessment. Local Government/Environmental Health Officers can provide service-specific guidance on jurisdictional food safety requirements, including food premises classification and compliance expectations, and are a practical first point of contact when assessing the food safety risk of a planned cooking experience.
	⊗ <u>FoodSafe Online</u>
	⊗ <u>I'm Alert (Environmental Health Australia)</u>
	⊗ <u>DoFoodSafely (Victoria)</u> Each offer accessible food safety training courses that build the skills and knowledge educators need to assess and manage food safety risks during cooking experiences with children. This includes safe food handling, hygiene, temperature control and allergen awareness. See FE Prefacing Statement on Allergies for food allergy training resources.
	⊗ <u>Kidsafe Australia</u> Provides evidence-based resources on preventing burns, scalds and other physical injuries in children, which are directly relevant to assessing and mitigating the physical harm risks, particularly heat and sharp utensils, that arise in cooking experiences with young children.

Common risk factors

It is important to consider that the following risk factors are not necessarily only relevant to the children attending ECEC. Educators, staff and guests involved in food preparation experiences are also susceptible to risks such as cuts, allergic reactions, and stress due to supervising a potentially risky experience, and they too should be considered when a risk assessment is conducted.

TABLE 8: Common risk factors

Food safety	
Bacterial growth	Causes food to become unsafe to consume and risks food poisoning.
Bacterial contamination	Introduces harmful bacteria that increases the risk of food poisoning. Includes contamination via cross-contamination or poor hygiene.
Physical contamination	Increases risk of choking or physical harm, e.g. string, plastic, band aids in food.
Cleaning and hygiene	Prevents cross-contamination and the potential for bacterial growth or the spread of allergens.
Separation of food	Prevents cross-contamination and the potential for bacterial growth or the spread of allergens.
Temperature control	Prevents bacterial growth and preserves freshness of food.
Safety Standards	Assist with planning for – and preventing harm during – cooking and food preparation experiences.
Food allergy	
Food allergies	A food allergy is an immune system reaction to a food. Food allergy reactions can be mild or may be severe and life threatening (anaphylaxis).
Signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction ²¹	Signs of a mild to moderate allergic reaction include: • Swelling of lips, face, eyes • Hives or welts • Tingling mouth • Abdominal pain, vomiting Signs of a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) include any of the following: • Difficult/noisy breathing • Swelling of tongue • Swelling/tightness in throat • Difficulty talking and/or hoarse voice • Wheeze or persistent cough • Persistent dizziness or collapse • Pale and floppy (young children)
Common allergens	• Milk (dairy) • Eggs • Peanuts • Tree nuts (almonds, cashews, etc.) • Soy • Wheat • Fish • Crustaceans (such as prawns) and molluscs (such as oysters) • Sesame ⚠ Any food can cause an allergic reaction. All food allergies must be taken seriously.
Food intolerance	A food intolerance does not involve the immune system and is not life threatening. Most food intolerances are caused when the body cannot digest the sugars in food.
Space	
Blind spots and hidden areas	Inadequate layout or complex, open spaces can restrict the ability of educators to supervise children at all times.
Proximity to hazards	Can increase the risk of knocks, spills and breakages. Examples include placing tables for experiences in inappropriate areas like near exits or in front of access ways.
Movement	Inadequate space for movement can cause children to run into each other.

Space (continued)

Unclear area boundaries	Lack of clear, defined, and contained play areas can lead to children wandering around with food or utensils in their hands.
Insufficient space	Increases the risk of bumps and spills.

Harm to children

Physical injuries	Slips, trips, and falls: - Wet or greasy floors, or dropped food and spills, increase the risk of falling, which can be particularly dangerous if the child falls against a hot surface or while holding a sharp object. - Trip hazards such as cords, rugs, child chairs, and tables should be moved to avoid injury. Cuts and lacerations: Sharp knives, graters, peelers, can openers, and broken glass can cause serious injuries. Burns and scalds: - Hot stoves, frypans, ovens, toaster ovens, hot food/liquids, steam or electric frypans can cause serious burns, as can boiling water, hot oil, and hot food containers (like bowls from a microwave). - Children's skin is thinner and more sensitive than adults', so extra care and supervision is needed for any experiences involving heat.
Cross-contamination	- Increases the risk of spreading bacteria. - Can cause severe reactions in children with food allergies.
Allergic reactions/anaphylaxis	Unchecked ingredients or cross-contamination can cause severe reactions in children with food allergies.
Choking	Ingredients not chopped appropriately or, in the case of younger children, eating raw dough or thick mixtures, can pose a choking risk.

Harm to educator

Physical injuries	Slips, trips, and falls: - Wet or greasy floors, or dropped food, increase the risk of falling, which can be particularly dangerous if the educator falls against a hot surface or while holding a sharp object. - Trip hazards such as cords, rugs, child chairs, tables. Cuts and lacerations: Sharp knives, graters, peelers, can openers, and broken glass can cause serious injuries. Burns and scalds: Hot stoves, frypans, ovens, toaster ovens, hot food/liquids, steam or electric frypans can cause serious burns, as can boiling water, hot oil, and hot food containers (like bowls from a microwave). Throwing food: Child throwing food or equipment at educator can injure the educator.
Cross-contamination	- Increases the risk of spreading bacteria. - Can cause severe reactions in educators with food allergies.
Stress and anxiety	Associated with: - Managing multiple tasks with children. - Lack of emergency guidelines and training if a child has an unexpected reaction to the food prepared. - Educators being unaware of children's dietary requirements and the policies and procedures in place to manage them. - Lack of supervision guidelines for cooking experiences to prevent children ingesting food items they are not supposed to eat or touching hot surfaces. - Rushing a cooking experience if there is a time constraint – this can also increase the risk of accidents occurring.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA4, QA7

Managing allergies in the ECEC setting

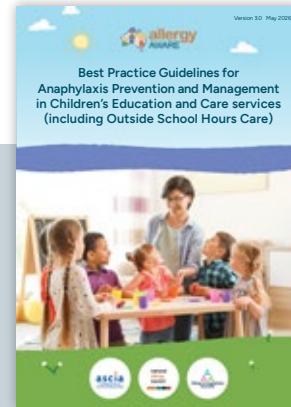
Allergies are common in Australia – it is estimated that around one in ten babies and one in twenty school aged children has a medically confirmed food allergy, and other children may have allergies to insect stings and medications.

While most children have allergies to the common allergy causing foods (cow's milk/dairy, soy, egg, wheat, fish, shellfish, peanut, tree nuts and sesame), it is possible to be allergic to any food, including fruits and vegetables. The only way to manage a food allergy is for the child to completely avoid the food they are allergic to. Even a crumb or drop of food, or a sip of a drink can cause an allergic reaction.

To help care for children and young people with allergies, the National Allergy Council have published *Best Practice Guidelines for Anaphylaxis Prevention and Management for Children's Education and Care (CEC) (including Outside School Hours Care)*.

The Best Practice Guidelines:

- Outline the **key principles** and recommendations for reducing the risk of anaphylaxis in early childhood education and care settings and outside school hours care services.
- A set of **resources** including templates and sample documents are available as free downloads from the National Allergy Council's website:
 - [Allergy Aware](#)
- An **implementation guide** supports services to put the recommendations into place.



↓ [Best Practice Guidelines for Anaphylaxis Prevention and Management for Children's Education and Care \(CEC\) \(including Outside School Hours Care\)](#)

FIGURE 2: Key principles for reducing the risk of anaphylaxis in children's education and care

Implement an allergy aware approach to preventing and managing anaphylaxis.	Provide age-appropriate education of children to help raise awareness and manage anaphylaxis risk in CEC services.
Have an anaphylaxis management policy. Review this policy and associated procedures if an allergic reaction occurs.	Implement reasonable and effective strategies to reduce the risk of accidental exposure to known allergic triggers and review anaphylaxis risk minimisation strategies if an allergic reaction occurs.
Obtain up-to-date medical information and develop individualised anaphylaxis care plans for each child at risk of anaphylaxis. These plans will include a copy of the child's ASCIA Action Plan.	Have at least one general use adrenaline device in each CEC service.
Educate and train staff in the prevention, recognition and treatment of allergic reactions including anaphylaxis. Educate and train staff who prepare, serve or supervise meals, in food allergen management.	Communicate about anaphylaxis management with CEC staff and the CEC community.
Ensure staff know which children are at risk of allergic reactions and understand that unexpected allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis, might occur for the first time in children not previously known to have allergy.	Offer support (including counselling) for CEC staff who manage an anaphylaxis.
	Appropriate reporting if an allergic reaction occurs while the child is in the care of the CEC service.

An allergy aware approach

The *Best Practice Guidelines for Anaphylaxis Prevention and Management for CEC* recommends that ECEC services have an Allergy Aware approach when caring for children at risk of anaphylaxis. Rather than focusing on avoidance of food allergens (such as nut free or egg free), Allergy Aware services work with families in many ways to lower the risk of a child with allergies having an allergic reaction. If an allergic reaction does happen while a child is at the service, it will be managed well as a range of good practices will have been put in place.

In addition to the minimum legislative requirements and in line with the *Best Practice Guidelines for Anaphylaxis Prevention and Management*, an Allergy Aware service should include the following:

Documentation

- ECEC services have a policy to reduce the risk of anaphylaxis.
- Services work with children and their families (where appropriate) to develop an individual anaphylaxis care plan. This includes a copy of the child's Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA) Action Plan written by their doctor or nurse practitioner.

Training

- All staff are trained to recognise and manage allergic reactions. This includes refresher training and practise with adrenaline device trainers.
- Cooks/chefs and educators are trained in how to prepare, store and serve food safely, and how to read food labels for food allergens. For more details on food allergy training and management visit:

🔗 [All about Allergens for CEC](#)

Risk reduction

- A range of measures are used to reduce the risk of a child having an allergic reaction while at the service. These measures may be different depending on the age of the child.

Examples include:

- Systems in place so that children get the right food and drinks for their allergies.
- Washing hands before and after eating.
- Not sharing food and drinks.
- Planning ahead for experiences that involve food such as parties and other special occasions.

Allergy medication

- General use adrenaline devices and an ASCIA First Aid Plan for Anaphylaxis are included in the service's first aid kit.
- Children's individual adrenaline devices and ASCIA Action Plans are stored unlocked and easily accessible to staff.

If an allergic reaction occurs

- ECEC services have processes in place to manage the allergic reaction.
- Afterwards they will review what was done well and what needs changing.
- Reactions will be reported.
- Staff and children involved will be offered support (including counselling).

Communication with the children's education and care community and children

- Communication about allergies raises awareness and encourages the whole community to work together to reduce the chance of a child having an allergic reaction at the ECEC service. See Communication about food allergies below for more details on communicating food allergy information.
- Where there is a child with a severe allergy, all children in the group should learn about allergies, so they can help to keep them safe.

Communication about food allergies

Everyone in the ECEC setting plays a role and needs to communicate about food allergies. For families, this begins from the enrolment process.

The Food Standards Code (FSANZ), states that services must provide the right information about allergens in the food and drinks that are served to the children, when families ask.

Services must follow the advice below:

- Services must not give a child with food allergy any food or drink that contains their food allergen.
- Food must be made in a way that reduces the risk of the food accidentally having the child's allergen in it.
- Food must be served in a way that makes sure the right food is given to the right child.
- Food and drink spills should be cleaned up quickly to reduce the chance that a child with food allergy will have contact with a food they are allergic to.
- Allergic reactions to food or drinks must be reported.
- Educators must know how to provide a safe environment for children with food allergies during all mealtimes, and when planning experiences, they need to ensure these are safe and inclusive for children with food allergy.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA6, QA7

All About Allergens for CEC online training and support resources



Allergy Aware website

[Allergy Aware website](#)

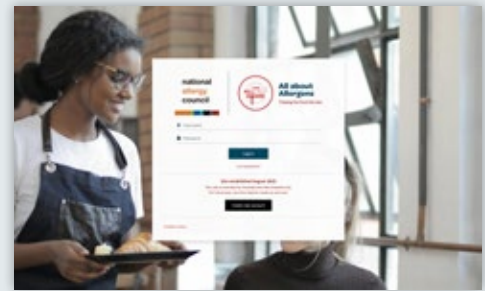
The Allergy Aware website is a resource hub that includes links to evidence-based resources and training for education and care services to help manage anaphylaxis. The website also contains links to state and territory specific information and resources. Note that the Allergy Aware website is separate from the All About Allergens Resource Hub which provides free training about managing food allergies when providing food. Further details on the All about Allergens Resource Hub can be found in the upcoming pages.



All About Allergens for CEC online training

[All about Allergens for CEC](#)

It is recommended that all staff involved in planning, ordering, making, serving and supervising meals complete the National Allergy Council's free All about Allergens for CEC food allergen management online training.



All About Allergens Kitchen Handbook

[All about Allergens Kitchen Handbook](#)

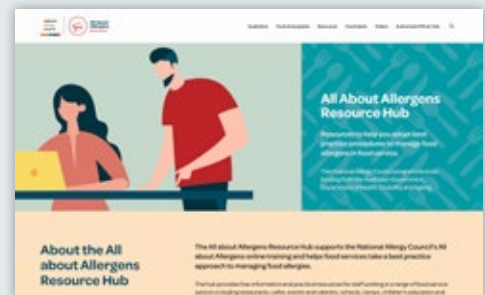
The National Allergy Council's All about Allergens Kitchen Handbook is the companion to the All about Allergens training. The Kitchen Handbook clearly outlines considerations when planning, ordering, making, serving and supervising meals for children with food allergies in Early Education and Care settings.



All about Allergens Resource Hub

[All about Allergens Resource Hub](#)

The All about Allergens Resource Hub supports the National Allergy Council's All about Allergens online training and helps food services take a best practice approach to managing food allergies. The hub provides free information and practical resources for staff working in a range of food service sectors including children's education and care.



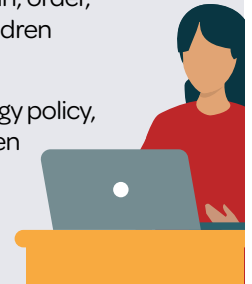
Managing food allergies in ECEC settings is everyone's responsibility

Managing food allergies is everyone's responsibility

Everyone plays a role and needs to communicate about food allergies.

Service Manager

- Make sure all staff are aware of the risk of food allergies. This includes managers, educators, cooks, chefs and other kitchen staff.
- Make sure that only staff who are trained in food allergen management plan, order, make, serve and supervise children eating the food.
- Make sure you have a food allergy policy, and procedures for food allergen management. Audit your service to make sure the policy and procedures are followed.



Parent/Carer

When they enrol, ask parents about their child's allergies and any other dietary needs.

Parents should:

- Tell the service if their child's allergies change.
- Provide a copy of their child's ASCIA Action Plan and allergy medication.



Educator

- Know how to recognise and respond to allergic reactions.
- Know how to provide a safe environment for children with food allergies during meal and snack times.
- Plan safe and inclusive activities for children with food allergy.



Cook/Chef

- Know how to make and serve suitable food for children with food allergies.
- Know what is in the food they make and serve.
- Know which children in their childcare service have food allergies.
- Be able to answer questions from parents of children with food allergies about the ingredients of the food they make and serve. Other CEC staff should know how to find this information if they are asked for it.



All food allergies must be taken seriously

Use the same approach for all types of food allergies, regardless of the type of ASCIA Action Plan they have.

Parents should not be asked to sign disclaimers or waivers about possible exposure to food allergens while their child is at a CEC service.



Prompts for planning

This section contains prompts to help ECEC staff think about diversity and inclusion in food and cooking experiences. Prompts include considerations around connection and relationships, family traditions and culture, creating rich rather than tokenistic experiences, and thinking about when to consult health professionals and educational experts for support.

These questions act as prompts for reflective practice and are particularly important when planning and reflecting on cooking and food preparation experiences. They are also relevant to consider across the MEP and Menu and Meal Quality (MMQ) modules. Use these prompts, in conjunction with the standard operating procedure template, to ensure a holistic experience is created for all children involved.

Diversity, inclusion and partnerships in practice

1. Connecting with children and families through food and cooking experiences

- How do we learn about the foods children eat at home?
- Have we asked families about cultural, religious, or personal food practices?
- Do we invite families to share recipes, cooking traditions, or food stories?
- How do food and cooking experiences support relationship-building between educators, children, and families?
- Do families see their food culture represented in our menu and/or cooking experiences?

2. Food experiences and children's relationships

- How do cooking experiences promote cooperation and shared responsibility?
- Are children encouraged to prepare, serve, and eat food together respectfully?
- Do we support children to understand that different families eat different foods – and that all are valued?
- How do we manage conversations about unfamiliar foods to promote respect rather than judgement?

3. Understanding family rhythms and food practices

- Have we asked about home mealtime routines (e.g. shared meals, prayer, eating styles)?
- Do we consider fasting periods, celebrations, or religious observances?
- How do we accommodate different meal patterns (e.g. main meal at lunch vs dinner)?
- Are we flexible where possible to reflect children's home experiences?

4. Honouring traditions, preferences and identity

- How do we incorporate children's favourite home foods into cooking experiences?
- Do children have opportunities to talk about foods that are special to their family?
 - the service?
- Are we celebrating everyday food diversity – not just during "cultural days"?
- How do we ensure children feel proud of their food traditions?

5. Avoiding assumptions in food planning

- Are we assuming all families from a particular culture eat the same foods?
- Have we checked dietary practices directly with each family?
- Do we avoid labelling foods as "normal" vs "different"?
- Are we careful not to present certain foods as exotic or unusual?

In practice:

Instead of: "All children from X culture eat this."

Ask: "Are there any foods that are important in your family?"

6. Tokenistic vs rich cultural food experiences

- Is this cooking experience part of ongoing learning, or a one-off event?
- Have we explored the meaning behind the food (history, celebrations, family significance)?
- Have families or community members contributed to planning?
- Do children revisit and reflect on the experience afterwards?

7. Building cultural knowledge and educator skills

- What do we know about the cultural significance of the foods we prepare?
- Have we engaged in professional learning about culturally responsive food practices?
- Are we open to learning alongside children and families?
- How do we model curiosity and respect when exploring unfamiliar foods?

8. Community groups and partnerships

- Can we invite local community members to share cooking traditions?
- Do we connect with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to respectfully explore bush foods?
- Are we partnering with local gardens, markets, or cultural organisations?
- Is the partnership reciprocal and respectful?

9. Food as citizenship and participation

- Are children involved in menu planning discussions?
- Do children vote on cooking experiences?
- Do we talk about fairness (e.g. sharing, sustainability, food waste)?
- Are children learning about where food comes from and community responsibility?

10. Feedback and ongoing consultation

- How often do we seek family feedback about food and cooking experiences?
- Do we provide surveys, suggestion boxes, or informal discussions?
- Can families easily suggest recipes or cultural dishes?
- Do children have opportunities to express preferences and dislikes respectfully?
- How do we communicate food and cooking experience changes based on feedback?

11. Health professionals and educational experts

- When do we consult dietitians or health professionals (e.g. food allergies or other dietary needs, concerns about growth or eating ability, sensory needs)?
- How do we involve families in decisions about specialised diets?
- Do we seek guidance on inclusive food and cooking experiences for children with diverse needs?
- Are our practices health-promoting while remaining culturally respectful?

12. Deep reflection for team meetings

- Do all children see their home experiences reflected in our cooking program?
- Whose food culture is most visible in our food and cooking experiences?
- How do we know families feel respected in relation to food and cooking experiences?
- Are food and cooking experiences relationship-rich learning opportunities, or just routine transitions?

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 2, Outcome 3,
Outcome 4

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA5, QA6

SECTION 3

Food Themes and Learning Experiences



Food themes and learning experiences

There are several types of experiences that offer a hands-on approach when learning about and exploring food.

Sensory-based food education

- Sensory-based food experiences engage multiple senses – sight, smell, touch, taste and sound. This allows the exploration of food in a playful, non-coercive context.²²
- Some studies suggest that when young children engage in vegetable-focused sensory learning experiences, there is an increased willingness to try new vegetables.^{22,23}
- Food experiences don't have to focus only on eating. Exploring food with the senses, such as looking, touching, smelling, and tasting, can help children feel more comfortable with different foods and become more aware of their own preferences.²⁴ These experiences can support children's thinking, senses, and emotional development.
- Sensory-based food education can also include creative experiences via non-food means, for example, cards, food-based picture books, playing charades, singing songs, sensory bins, sprouting, imaginary shops/farmers markets or play kitchens.²⁵

Gardening and kitchen garden programs

- Growing and harvesting food before preparing and sharing it gives children an understanding of where food comes from. It also gives them responsibility, which they tend to respond to positively.⁵
- Hands-on planting and harvesting can spark curiosity and a desire to taste the produce and may support a greater willingness to try new vegetables.²³

See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75

⚠ When food-based learning experiences occur, the safety and social inclusion of children with food allergies must also be considered.

Where experiences are pre-planned, ensure that information is communicated to families of children with food allergies, and that these families are given the opportunity to comment or contribute.

See Section 2, page 57

Incorporating cultural diversity

When experiential learning is intentionally designed to include cultural diversity, it can build food literacy skills, increase willingness to try new foods, and build understanding and respect for diverse food traditions and the communities that sustain them.^{26,27} Strategies include cooking days linked to children's cultural backgrounds, mapping where food comes from, family recipe sharing, and comparing staple foods across cultures.

Culturally inclusive food education can go beyond celebrating diversity. Including conversations about fairness, inclusion and respect for diverse food practices lays the foundation for critical food literacy.²⁸

See Section 2, page 61

Place-based learning and community connectedness

An Australian study found that regular exposure to local food systems through hands-on experiences improved children's awareness of, and preferences for, regionally appropriate food.²⁷ Connections might be made through local farmers, community gardens, cultural community members, markets or local food educators.

Place-based learning can also include embedding local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into practice. As one example, a service partnered with a local chef specialising in Indigenous ingredients, purchased damper kits, and took part in an online Indigenous cooking session shared with the children. The children went on to demonstrate their own developing relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and cultures.²⁹

Note: Educators are encouraged to think carefully about how food is used in experiences. For some children, especially those who may not always have enough food at home, using food only for play could be upsetting or confusing. Where possible and safe, these experiences should include the option for children to eat the food.

Reflective questions



Educators

- *How are the cultural backgrounds and food traditions of the children in your room reflected in your planned and spontaneous experiences? Are there any families whose traditions haven't yet found their way in?*

Service Leadership team

- *Does anyone on your team have the skills or interest to lead a garden program? What support, training or materials could you offer to encourage this?*

Experience examples

The following experiences build on those mentioned previously. Each is presented across age groups (birth to two, two to three, three plus), with sustainability, cultural diversity and seasonality running as threads throughout, supporting these connections to be woven across the day.



Experiences using natural resources

- Experience 1: Herb garden explorers
- Experience 2: Fruit and vegetable exploration baskets



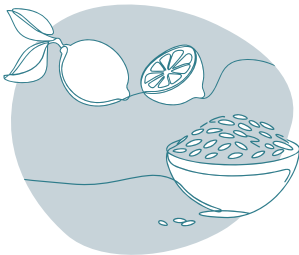
Experiences connecting food with people and place

- Experience 1: Farm to plate
- Experience 2: Food, culture and belonging



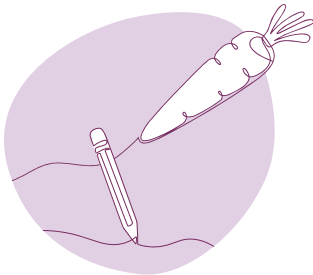
Experiences using play

- Experience 1: Making meaning through kitchen play and everyday food experiences
- Experience 2: Making magic with mud



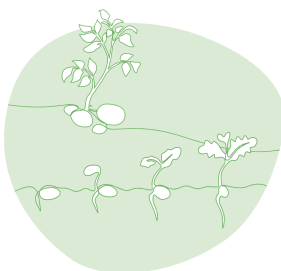
Experiences involving the senses

- Experience 1: Citrus and zest investigation
- Experience 2: Mash, mix and marvel



Experiences involving art

- Experience 1: Exploring colour through food
- Experience 2: My food, my story, my identity



Experiences for services without garden access

- Experience 1: Indoor potato patch
- Experience 2: From scrap to sprout

Experiences using natural resources

Experience 1: Herb garden explorers

Herb gardens invite children to grow and care for fresh herbs. From soil to plate, herbs provide meaningful opportunities to explore environmental care, scientific inquiry, and create a culture of shared responsibility. Herbs offer a rich sensory experience for all age groups from babies through to preschoolers. It is the perfect way to build connection between nature, food exploration and sustainability.

See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. herbs).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

Sensory exploration

- Smell herbs from garden.
- Touch and explore herbs with hands.
- Crush herbs to observe the change in scent.
- Model descriptive language to build vocabulary.

Toddlers (2-3)

Sensory and play exploration

- Add herbs to the playdough table to observe changes to scent and texture.
- Add herbs into waterplay.
- Cut herbs with scissors.
- Assist with the watering of the herb garden using small watering cans and spray bottles to care for plants.

Preschool age (3+)

Growing

- Plant herbs into garden from seeds or seedlings.
- Explore what plants need to grow.
- Observe, draw and document growth of herbs.
- Harvest, wash and prepare herbs and take to the kitchen to be used in meals.
- Engage in cooking experience using freshly harvested herbs.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Grow other fast-growing foods e.g. beans, tomatoes, sprouts.
- Include other sensory friendly plants into the garden.
- Scrap to sprout: growing using scraps e.g. celery stalk, carrot tops and avocado seeds.
- Introduce a composting system to extend understanding of sustainability.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

- Provide tools, e.g. a shovel or trowel for digging.
- Offer gloves.

Visual supports

- Use visual supports to sequence the steps involved in the experience e.g. dig, plant, water, cover.
- Use a visual schedule to assist children in anticipating when gardening experiences will take place.

Engagement

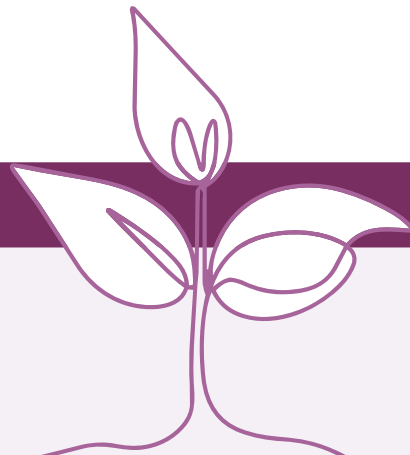
Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Small group or 1:1. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices.

RESOURCES

- Access to a garden or raised garden bed
- Herb seeds or seedlings
- Mortar and pestle or other tools to crush herbs
- Playdough table and tools
- Waterplay tray and tools
- Watering cans and spray bottles



CONNECTION TO THEME

Sustainability
Environmental

- Learn to care for living plants.
- Explore a plant's life cycle.
- Explore composting through extension.
- Learn to harvest only what is needed.
- Reuse water from waterplay for the garden and discarded drinking water.

Economic

- Growing your own herbs reduces the need to buy them.

Cultural diversity

- Explore herbs that are used in different cultural cuisines.
- Invite families to share how they use herbs in their cooking.

Seasonality

- Explore how the season impacts upon growth and harvesting.
- Research into which crops grow better in which season.
- Identify the need for water and sunlight in order for growth.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|---|--|
| • <i>Growing Vegetable Soup</i>
Lois Ehlert | • <i>Planting a Rainbow</i>
Lois Ehlert |
| • <i>A Year in Our New Garden</i>
Gerda Muller | • <i>The Tiny Seed</i>
Eric Carle |
| • <i>I Eat Vegetables</i>
Hannah Tofts | • <i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i> |
| • <i>Apple Farmer Annie</i>
Monica Wellington | |

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK**Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

- Caring for living things builds confidence and empathy.
- Revisiting and tending to the herb garden builds a sense of belonging.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Watering and harvesting show children their actions matter.
- Growing and sharing food builds understanding of where it comes from.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Smelling, touching and tasting builds comfort with new textures.
- Trying food from garden to plate builds confidence around new foods.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Watching herbs grow builds curiosity and early scientific thinking.
- Comparing and measuring herbs builds early maths understanding.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Describing what they see and smell builds vocabulary.
- Retelling the growing process builds early storytelling and sequencing skills.

Experiences using natural resources

Experience 2: Fruit and vegetable exploration baskets

Fruit and vegetable exploration baskets invite children to explore whole foods through engaging with their senses during hands-on investigation. This experience builds food familiarity through natural curiosity and gentle exposure. Using real fruit and vegetables for this experience promotes rich conversation on sustainability, where food comes from and fosters confident relationships with food.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. fruit, vegetables).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

Present an assortment of whole fruit and vegetables in baskets.

- Hold, touch and explore fruit and vegetables.
- Smelling and noticing differences in scent.
- Develop oral language through naming fruit and vegetables.
- Model descriptive language e.g. colour, texture and smell.
- Engage in cause-and-effect play such as rolling, squeezing and banging.

Toddlers (2-3)

- Sort fruit and vegetables by attributes, e.g. colours, sizes, and shapes.
- Wash fruit and vegetables in trays of water.
- Assist with peeling soft fruits like bananas and mandarins.
- Provide safe cutting experiences using child-safe tools to explore texture.
- Model descriptive language e.g. soft, smooth, hard, bumpy.
- Model the names of fruits and vegetables to support vocabulary and imitation.

Preschool age (3+)

- Sort into categories such as leafy, root, fruit and vegetable.
- Weigh fruit and vegetables using formal and informal units (e.g. balance scales, kitchen scales and hefting).
- Cut fruit and vegetables to make mealtime plates (focus on the exposure with no pressure to eat).
- Investigate peer favourite fruits and vegetables to compare preferences.
- Engage in discussions about sustainable practices, food waste and where food comes from.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Cut open fruit and vegetables to look inside structures e.g. the star of an apple, the seeds from a capsicum.
- Add magnifying glasses so children can take a closer look at fruits and vegetables.
- Explore the concept of floating and sinking with fruits and vegetables.
- Match coloured scarves to fruit and vegetable colours.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

- Use whole fruits and vegetables first.
- Offer tongs, gloves or scoops.
- Be mindful of strong smelling fruits and vegetables – introduce gradually and with choice.

Visual supports

Use visual supports to sequence the steps involved in the experience e.g. take banana, peel, cut, put on plate.

Engagement

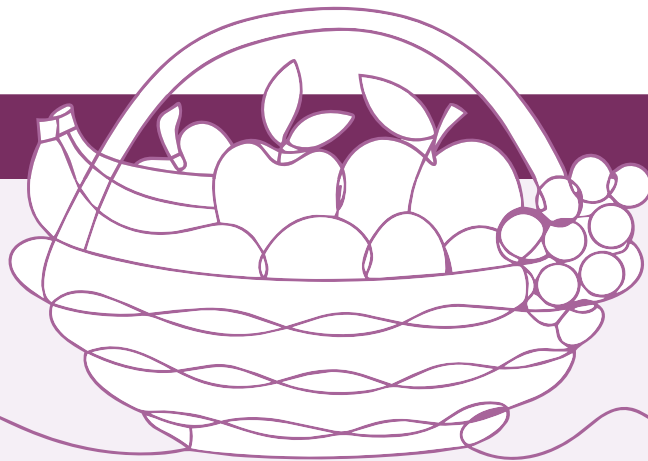
Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Small group or 1:1. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

RESOURCES

- Baskets
- Assorted fruit and vegetables
- Water play set up for washing fruit and vegetables
- Child safe knives and utensils for cutting
- Scales: kitchen scales, pan scales
- Magnifying glasses
- Coloured scarves



CONNECTION TO THEME

Sustainability*Environmental*

- Explore where fruit and vegetables come from.
- Investigate seeds and planting scraps.
- Reuse fruit and vegetable area exploration (e.g. if appropriate wash and eat, compost, worm farm).

Cultural diversity

- Include produce from different cultural cuisines.
- Learn food names in home languages.

Seasonality

- Compare summer and winter fruits and vegetables.
- Observe colour changes in fruit and vegetables over time.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- *Oliver's Vegetable*
Vivian French & Alison Bartlett
- *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*
Eric Carle
- *Growing Vegetable Soup*
Lois Ehlert
- *A Year in Our New Garden*
Gerda Muller
- *Seasons of Arnold's Apple Tree*
Gail Gibbons

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Comparing favourite fruits and vegetables builds confidence in personal preferences.
- Choosing what to explore first builds independence.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Investigating where food comes from builds understanding of its journey to the plate.
- Composting food scraps builds responsibility towards the environment.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Touching, smelling and tasting builds comfort with new textures.
- Low-pressure exposure builds comfort trying new food.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Sorting, categorising and weighing builds early maths thinking.
- Looking inside fruit and vegetables builds curiosity and scientific thinking.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Naming and describing fruit and vegetables builds vocabulary.
- Comparing preferences builds conversation skills.

Experiences connecting food with people and place

Experience 1: Farm to plate

Farm to plate explores the journey of how the food we eat reaches our plate. Through sensory play, pretend play, hands-on experiences and real-world connections, children learn the fundamentals of growing, farming, and sustainability in fun and engaging ways.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. wheat, corn, oats).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

- Provide a farm sensory tray with large farm animal toys, soft whole fruit and vegetable toys.
- Explore animal sounds by listening to farm noises and singing familiar songs.
- Look at photos of real farm animals to build recognition and connection.

Toddlers (2-3)

- Provide a farm sensory tray with extended materials such as soil and oats.
- Include felt trees with attachable fruit to build understanding and connection.
- Display photos of farm animals and fresh produce.
- Picture match: matching animals to produce, e.g. cow to milk and chicken to eggs.
- Sort food into bowls from animals and from plants.

Preschool age (3+)

- Extend farm sensory play with additional materials such as trucks to transport produce and market stalls for role play.
- Sort and categorise produce into dairy, meat/animal, fruit, vegetables and grain.
- Participate in a virtual "meet the farmer" experience or visit a local farm on incursion/excursion.
- Grind whole wheat grains using a mill or mortar and pestle to observe changes.
- Explore the process from "grain to bread" (wheat, flour, dough, bread).

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Explore how weather events impact crop growth.
- Examine food packaging to identify and sort food made in Australia and imported foods.
- Transform milk/cream into butter through hands-on shaking.
- Add water play to the sensory tray to model watering the crops or rain on the farm.
- Introduce farm animal puppets for interactive singing and dramatic play.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

- Individual sensory tray for children who might find shared sensory play overwhelming.
- Be mindful of loud animal sounds for children with sensory sensitivities. Some services may have access to noise-cancelling headphones, so these could be offered if needed.
- Offer gloves, scoops, shovels or spoons to engage in sensory play.

Predictable routines

Prepare children in advance if there is an incursion or excursion.

Engagement

Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Small group or 1:1. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

RESOURCES

- Large tray for sensory play
- Assorted toys – farm animals, fruits, vegetables, hay, soil, grain, corn, oats for a sensory tray set up
- Speaker and recorded animal sounds
- Photos of farm animals and produce
- Felt farm animal and produce set
- Whole wheat grains, mortar and pestle or hand mill
- Cooking utensils

CONNECTION TO THEME

 Sustainability*Environmental*

- Care for animals and living things.
- Mindful use of food and composting waste after use.
- Environmental impact.

Social

- Understand local food systems.
- Connecting with local farmers through excursions and incursions.

Economic

- Understanding how buying local supports farmers.

 Cultural diversity

- Sort produce from diverse origins.
- Explore how different foods might be used in different homes.
- Explore traditional farming across cultures.

 Seasonality

- Explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seasonal knowledge.
- Observe plant growth across seasons.
- Set up the sensory trays and small world differently to reflect different seasons.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|---|--|
| • <i>Oh Dear!</i>
Rod Campbell | • <i>Noisy Farm</i>
Rod Campbell |
| • <i>My Farm</i>
Alison Lester | • <i>Rosie's Walk</i>
Pat Hutchins |
| • <i>Farmer Duck</i>
Martin Waddell & Helen Oxenbury | • <i>Peep Inside the Farm</i>
Anna Milbourne |
| • <i>Mrs Wish-Washy's Farm</i>
Joy Cowley & Elizabeth Fuller | • <i>Welcome to Bush Tucker Plants</i>
Greg Smith & Leila Warne |

SONGS AND NURSERY RHYMES

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| • Old MacDonald Had a Farm | • Little Bo Peep |
| • 5 Little Ducks | • B-I-N-G-O |
| • Mary Had a Little Lamb | |

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Engaging in farm-related role play explores identities, roles and points of view.
- Taking on different roles in pretend play builds a sense of self and belonging.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Excursions and incursions build real-world connections to community.
- Cooking together and sharing meals builds a sense of community.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Sensory exploration of farm produce builds confidence around new foods.
- Visiting or engaging with a farm setting builds confidence in new experiences.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Sorting, categorising and measuring builds early maths thinking.
- Cooking and observing change builds curiosity and scientific thinking.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Naming and describing farm animals builds vocabulary.
- Retelling the cooking process builds early sequencing skills.



Experiences connecting food with people and place

Experience 2: Food, culture and belonging

This experience explores how food connects people in the community. It teaches children that there is more to food than simply eating. It creates togetherness through sharing traditions, memories, celebrations, and rituals that build a deep-rooted sense of identity.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. spices, wheat-based playdough).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

- Including spices and herbs into sensory play (e.g. mix cinnamon, nutmeg, turmeric, cumin into playdough).
- Sharing photos of mealtimes from home and create a display at child height for children to view and share.
- Invite families to share how mealtimes look in their household and incorporate rituals where possible.
- Organise shared mealtimes with children from older rooms as opportunities for connection.

Toddlers (2-3)

- Invite children to share their favourite meals through photos from home, drawings, and documented responses.
- Create dramatic play restaurants that represent different cuisines e.g. Indian, Italian, Chinese.
- Have a shared picnic with an emphasis on togetherness and sharing and replicate this in a picnic play area to extend learning through play.

Preschool age (3+)

- Explore foods that connect to celebrations e.g. Chinese New Year, Diwali, birthdays etc.
- Map children's cultural backgrounds and explore traditional foods of those regions.
- Create a room cookbook featuring children's favourite recipes from home.
- Extend dramatic play to include children creating menus, taking orders, making signs, and recipe books. Invite the children to decide on the theme, cuisine and foods served, rotating cuisines over time.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Display the photos of family mealtimes during eating times so educators can model language and spark conversation (e.g. "Oliver eats pasta on Sundays.") Create a photo book to include in the book corner.
- Educators use intentional conversation starters during shared mealtimes (e.g. "At my house we eat dinner...")
- Create a shared class recipe (e.g. a fruit salad recipe.) and share with other rooms or families.

RESOURCES

- Herbs and spices for sensory play
- Restaurant dramatic play resources

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

- Use of mild herbs to begin with to gauge children who may have sensitivities to taste and smell.
- If there is a child with strong sensitivities, provide unscented playdough for them.
- Offer tools with the playdough so children who are tactile defensive do not have to physically touch the playdough.
- Have cloths or handwipes close by for children to wipe hands if needed.
- Keep the dramatic play area free from visual clutter and clearly define the space to prevent sensory overwhelm.

Visual support

Create simple play sequences using pictures or photos to assist children understand how to use the space i.e. put food in pot, place on stove, stir and tip into bowl.

Predictable routines

Provide verbal and visual warnings before changing the routine e.g. having a picnic for lunch rather than eating at the table.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

Engagement

Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Would the respond better to small groups or 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.

CONNECTION TO THEME

 Sustainability**Environmental**

- Develop an understanding that different foods grow in different parts of the world.
- Explore how traditional food practices work with the seasons and local environment.

Social

- Explore sustainable practices of different cultures.
- Learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders about traditional food practices.

 Cultural diversity

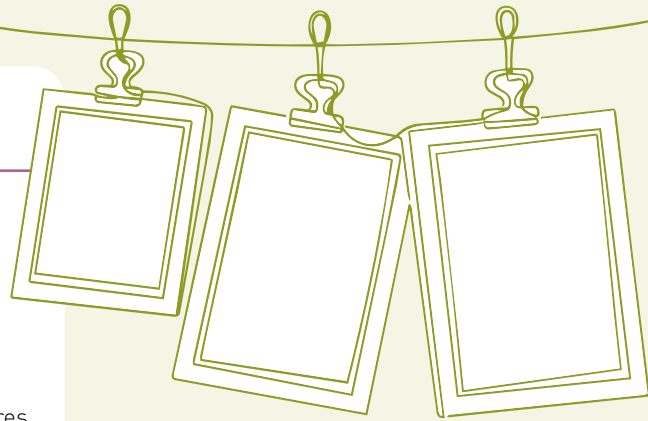
- Connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders to explore food knowledge and traditions.
- Build understanding that families eat different foods.
- Explore traditional dishes and their cultural significance.
- Recognise that families celebrate different occasions and traditions.

 Seasonality

- Explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seasonal knowledge.
- Explore how climate affects the foods different cultures eat, and when.
- Understand that different foods are eaten at different times of the year.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|--|--|
| • <i>Handa's Surprise</i>
Eileen Browne | • <i>We're Going On a Picnic!</i>
Pat Hutchins |
| • <i>No Kimchi for Me</i>
Aram Kim | • <i>Let's Eat!</i>
Ana Zamorano & Julie Vivas |
| • <i>A Taste Adventure with</i>
<i>Melissa Leong</i>
Melissa Leong | • <i>What's Cooking at 10 Garden</i>
<i>Street?</i>
Felicita Sala |
| • <i>The Tiger Who Came to Tea</i>
Judith Kerr | • <i>Walking with the Seasons in</i>
<i>Kakadu</i>
Diane Lucas |
| • <i>Stay for Dinner</i>
Sandhya Parappukkaran &
Michaelle Pereira | • <i>Welcome to Bush Tucker</i>
<i>Plant,</i>
Greg Smith & Leila Warne |



EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Sharing family food traditions builds a sense of who they are and where they come from.
- Exploring cultural celebrations connects children to their own traditions.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Learning about different cultural foods builds understanding and respect for diversity.
- Connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander builds connection to culture and place.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Sharing food and traditions together builds a sense of belonging.
- Seeing their own culture reflected and valued builds confidence and comfort.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Sorting and categorising foods builds early maths thinking.
- Using a world map to locate cultural backgrounds builds early geographic understanding.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Sharing stories about food builds oral language skills.
- Creating menus and recipes builds early literacy skills.

Experiences using play

Experience 1: Making meaning through kitchen play and everyday food experiences

Dramatic play areas play an important role in ECEC settings as they reflect children's real-world experiences. Kitchens and home corners provide children with opportunities to make meaning and connections with food within their play. It is where children practice familiar routines, learn about diverse family roles, cultural practices, and social relationships.

Kitchen play areas should look and feel like home with real cooking utensils and home life representations. This provides children with a strong sense of identity and belonging. It gives children a safe space to practise lived experiences to build meaning in authentic ways.

Babies (Birth-2)

Environmental set up

- Large soft fruit and vegetable toys.
- Baskets.
- Lightweight pots and pans.
- Muffin tray.
- Large but real materials such as wooden spoons and whisks.
- Child-safe bowls, plates, and cutlery.
- Metal bowls and other kitchen related tools that make noise.

Educator role

- Model familiar fruit and vegetable names.
- Model action words like stir, drink and pour.
- Model mealtime routines and rituals.

Toddlers (2-3)

Environmental set up

- Low stove, sink or kitchen set up.
- Low table for serving food and sitting around.
- Real, but lightweight pots and frying pans.
- Oven trays and muffin tins.
- Tea towels, aprons, oven mittens and sponges.
- Dolls to cook and feed.
- Real and recycled food packaging from dry pantry products, e.g. cereal boxes etc. Avoid the use of milk bottles and egg cartons to reduce the risk of children handling contaminated products.
- Chopping boards.
- Kettle or teapot.
- Paper and pencils.
- Herb shakers.

Educator role

- Extend and scaffold language during play.
- Model role-play dialogue and everyday interactions.

Preschool age (3+)

Environmental set up

- Defined kitchen space with functional areas e.g. preparation space, sink, oven, fridge, dining table.
- Metal pots and pans.
- Oven trays and muffin tins.
- Measuring cups and spoons.
- Wooden chopping boards.
- Kitchen scales and timers.
- Toaster, kettle and microwave.
- Recipe and cookbooks.
- Real and recycled food packaging e.g. egg cartons, milk cartons, cereal boxes etc.
- Bin, recycling bin, compost bin.
- Sponges, spray bottles, tea towels.
- Paper and pencils.
- Herb shakers.
- Pretend mobile device.

Educator role

- Embed literacy opportunities in play such as writing lists recipes, and menus, or entering them onto a mobile device.
- Facilitate turn-taking, role play and perspective taking.
- Support numeracy concepts such as measuring, timing and sequencing.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Extend the dramatic play area to restaurants, supermarkets, farmers' markets, bakery and other food-related play opportunities that reflect what the children are likely to experience as part of their culture and community.
- Rotate food types around to broaden understanding of food groups and cuisines.
- Invite children to suggest additions or changes they would like incorporated into the area.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES**Sensory support**

- Keep the dramatic play area free from visual clutter and clearly define the space to prevent sensory overwhelm.
- Dramatic play areas can be loud. Provide noise cancelling headphones for children who may be sensitive to auditory stimulation.

Visual supports

- Create simple play sequences to assist children understand how to use the space i.e. put food in pot, place on stove, stir and tip into bowl.
- Educator to model how to play and use the space.

Communication

- Model the same consistent language and play experience daily to assist in development of play skills.
- Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

CONNECTION TO THEME**Sustainability****Environmental**

- Use of compost and recycling bins in dramatic play.
- Use of real utensils and cooking items.
- Use of recycled food packaging.

Cultural diversity

- Include culturally diverse eating tools, alongside photographs, books and examples of how different cultures use them.
- Include food representations from different culture.

Seasonality

- Include food based-on the current season.
- Seasonal shopping lists and menus.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK**Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

- Practicing familiar routines and roles builds a sense of self and belonging.
- Imitating familiar experiences builds confidence to engage with the world.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Playing together builds a sense of community.
- Exploring cultural differences in play builds understanding of diverse traditions.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Rehearsing everyday routines through play builds confidence and comfort.
- Caring for self and others in play builds independence and empathy.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Choosing what to include in the play space builds ownership and curiosity.
- Extending play through new roles or scenarios builds problem-solving and flexible thinking.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Dramatic play builds turn-taking and communication skills.
- Writing lists, menus and signs builds early literacy skills.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- *I'm a Hungry Dinosaur*
Janeen Brain & Ann James
- *Hattie Helps Out*
Jane Godwin, Davina Bell & Fraya Blackwood
- *The Very Hungry Bear*
Nick Bland
- *The Little Red Hen*
Ronne Randall

Experiences using play

Experience 2: Making magic with mud

Mud kitchens and sand play offer wonderful, rich opportunities for open-ended play. Children naturally experiment, create, problem solve and collaborate to mirror real world experiences. A well-designed and set-up mud kitchen is a wonderful addition to an ECEC environment, as it creates sustained play with endless authentic learning opportunities. Through playing with mud, children explore mathematical thinking, scientific concepts, and language development.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. herbs).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

Environmental set up

- Large trays for sand and mud.
- Loose parts such as wood slices, pinecones, large seed pods.
- Supervised access to water in small buckets or damp sand.
- Assorted spoons, cups, and bowls.

Educator role

- Model key vocabulary and action words.
- Model actions such as mixing, stirring and pouring.
- Support sensory preferences.
- Encourage early social interaction.

Toddlers (2-3)

Environmental set up

- A mud kitchen or low table.
- Old pots, pans, muffin trays, and cake tins.
- Assorted spoons, ladles and whisks.
- Measuring cups and spoons.
- Cups and bowls.
- Leaves, herbs, sticks and flowers for mixing and making.
- Access to water.

Educator role

- Model pretend play.
- Extend play by adding additional steps to the sequence.
- Encourage problem solving and cause-and-effect experimenting.
- Incorporate everyday math language, e.g. full, empty, more, less.

Preschool age (3+)

Environmental set up

- A well-defined mud kitchen area.
- Space for a mud kitchen cafe using small tables or milk crates for serving.
- Old pots, pans, muffin trays, and cake tins.
- Scales.
- Measuring cups and spoons.
- Assorted spoons, ladles and whisks.
- Cups and bowls.
- Leaves, herbs, sticks and flowers for mixing and making.
- Supervised access to water.
- Recipe cards and books.
- Ask the children what else they would like in the space.
- Dress ups e.g. aprons, hats, sunglasses.
- Invite children to suggestion additional materials for the space.

Educator role

- Ask open ended questions to provoke thought e.g. "What happens if we add more water?" "How can we make it stick together?"
- Encourage hypothesising, predicting and problem solving.
- Embed mathematical and science-based concepts naturally into play.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Add a natural payment system for the mud cafe e.g. paying with stones and leaves.
- Introduce clay into the area.
- Make mud paint.
- Compare different soil and sand types.
- Compost natural materials once used.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES**Sensory support**

- Provide an individual sensory tray for children who might find shared sensory play overwhelming.
- Offer tools with the sand and mud so children who are tactile defensive do not have to physically touch the mud.
- Offer children gloves to wear.
- Have cloths or towels close by for children to wipe their hands.

Visual supports

Include simple play sequences to visually represent the steps involved i.e. pour, mix, scoop, serve.

Engagement

- Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Would they respond better to small groups or 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experience, observing is appropriate.
- Include their special interest in the play to encourage participation i.e. if they like trains, include trains in the space.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

CONNECTION TO THEME**Sustainability***Environmental*

- Use natural resources and materials.
- Learn about the role soil plays in the environment.
- Compost natural materials after use.
- Show care for nature and the outdoor environment.

Cultural diversity

- Include diverse cooking utensils.
- Use recipe cards from a range of cuisines.
- Investigate different cooking practices.
- Connect with the land in culturally respectful ways.

Seasonality

- Provide different materials based on the season, e.g. fallen leaves in autumn, flowers in spring.
- Explore how weather affects the play, e.g. sand dries quickly in summer.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK**Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

- Following their own ideas in open-ended play builds confidence in who they are.
- Choosing what to mix, create and do builds a sense of autonomy.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Exploring natural elements like sand, water and leaves builds a connection to nature.
- Sharing tools, space and ideas builds collaboration with peers.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Scooping, pouring, squeezing and mixing natural materials builds fine motor skills.
- Tactile sensory play with water and sand builds emotional regulation and support wellbeing.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Experimenting with how properties change by adding water and sand builds problem-solving and scientific thinking.
- Hypothesising and exploring cause and effect builds curiosity and reasoning skills.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Role-play and play dialogue build conversation skills.
- Imitating actions or words of others builds vocabulary understanding.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- *Wombat Stew*
Marcia Vaughan
- *Crabbing with Dad*
Paul Seden
- *Welcome to Bush Tucker Plants*
Greg Smith & Leila Warne

Experiences involving the senses

Experience 1: Citrus and zest investigation

Citrus fruits offer a powerful multisensory exploration opportunity. Through smelling, touching, observing and tasting (where appropriate) children are immersed in hands-on investigating. Peeling, juicing and zesting help children build a sensory awareness through inquiry and curiosity.

Note: These experiences are about exposure and sensory exploration and are pressure-free. This means there is no pressure for children to consume the foods if they do not wish to.

Safety note: This experience should not be undertaken outside due to the risk of phytophotodermatitis. This condition can be caused when citrus juice on skin reacts with UV light and causes the skin to burn.³⁰

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. citrus fruits).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

- Offer whole citrus fruits for exploration, e.g. lemons, oranges, mandarins, and limes.
- Roll fruit in whole form across a mat, table or sensory tray.
- Encourage babies to feel the texture of the peel.
- Smell peeled or cut citrus fruits (only if interested)
- Add cut citrus fruits into water play.

Toddlers (2-3)

- Add cut citrus fruits into water play.
- Use handheld manual juicers to make juice.
- Freeze juice to make icy poles.
- Tip and pour juice into cups or jugs.
- Cut citrus fruits in half for children to hand squeeze.
- Peel easy-to-peel citrus fruits such as a mandarin.
- Sort citrus fruits into colours and types.
- Create observational drawing and painting of fruit.
- Explore segments of fruit.

Preschool age (3+)

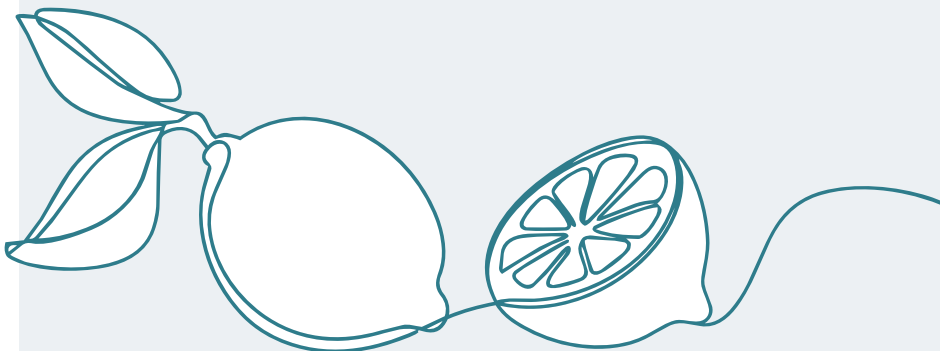
- Use handheld manual juicers to make juice.
- Investigate which citrus fruit produces the most juice.
- Freeze juice to make icy poles and to observe changes in state.
- Grate and zest citrus peel to use in cooking e.g. orange and poppy seed muffins.
- Add grated zest to playdough and water play.
- Explore and count segments of fruit.
- Use magnifying glasses to observe peel and inside of fruit.
- Weigh assorted citrus fruits on pan scales.
- Provide child-safe knives for children to explore the fruit and make a citrus fruit salad.
- Create observational drawing and painting of fruit.
- Add a slice of lemon in cool water for consumption.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Plant citrus seeds in cups, place in a sunny position with water and document growth over time.
- Conduct floating and sinking investigation. Does citrus float or sink?
- Dry or dehydrate citrus peels and slices to create scent jars.

RESOURCES

- ▢ Assorted citrus fruit
- ▢ Handheld manual juicers
- ▢ Magnifying glasses
- ▢ Scales
- ▢ Child safe knives and cooking utensils



NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES**Sensory support**

- Some neurodivergent learners may be averse to citrus fruit. They have multiple strong sensory elements i.e. smell, texture and taste.
- Never make a child smell directly if they are uncomfortable.
- Provide scents in jars rather than smelling directly from the fruit for children sensitive to smells.
- Provide whole fruit for exploration rather than cut fruit.
- Provide gloves for children to wear.
- Ensure cloth or towel available to wipe hands.

Visual support

Include simple play sequences to visually represent the steps involved i.e. cut, juice, pour.

Engagement

- Provide choice rather than giving direct instructions i.e. would you like to juice or pour?
- Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Would they respond better to small groups or 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

CONNECTION TO THEME**Sustainability****Environmental**

- Compost peel.
- Learn about citrus trees.
- Use the whole fruit peel, juice and flesh.

Cultural diversity

- Explore how citrus grows in different countries.
- Incorporate culturally diverse citrus recipes.
- Learn the names of fruit in different languages.

Seasonality

- Understand when citrus fruit is in season and what climate citrus grows in.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK**Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

- Noticing and naming their own reactions to citrus builds self-awareness.
- Noticing how peers respond builds understanding of others.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Group investigations build shared discoveries and collaboration.
- Comparing how citrus grows in different countries builds understanding of the wider world.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Squeezing, juicing and picking seeds builds fine motor skills.
- Handling kitchen tools builds increasing competence and confidence.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Investigating of citrus using their senses builds curiosity and wonder.
- Squeezing and juicing fruits builds understanding of cause and effect.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Describing sensory experiences of citrus builds vocabulary.
- Observational drawings build idea expression and meaning-making.
- Imitating actions or words of others builds vocabulary understanding.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- *Easy Peasy Lemon Squeezy*
KeriAnne Jelinek
- *When Grandma Gives You a Lemon Tree*
Jamie Deeniham
- *Eating the Alphabet*
Lois Ehlert
- *Oliver's Fruit Salad*
Vivian French & Alison Bartlett

Experiences involving the senses

Experience 2: Mash, mix and marvel

Vegetables provide a wonderful opportunity for children to explore bright, vibrant colours while engaging their senses through mixing, mashing, tasting and creating. As vegetables soften through steaming, roasting or boiling, they become safe and inviting for little hands to squish, spread and investigate, while also offering opportunities to explore colour, texture, smell and taste.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. vegetables).

See Section 2, page 57

From bright orange pumpkin to deep purple beetroot, children can delight in squishing, spreading and mixing a variety of vegetables and, if they choose, tasting them as they discover new colours, textures and flavours.

Babies (Birth-2)

- Provide individual portions of cooked vegetables for exploration through squishing and mixing (pumpkin, sweet potato, beetroot, potato).
- Explore texture and colour by squishing, squeezing and mashing vegetables between fingers.
- Supervised tasting and mouthing can be supported from each child's individual bowl or tray.
- Encourage children to smell the vegetables, commenting on the aroma.
- Educator to model descriptive language such as warm, soft and orange.

Toddlers (2-3)

- Provide individual bowls of steamed or mashed vegetables for mixing, scooping and spreading.
- Encourage children to use their hands, spoons or potato mashers to combine and mix vegetables together.
- Draw children's attention to the transformation of colours and textures as vegetables are mixed together.
- Educator to model language such as smooth, lumpy, thick, soft, warm and cool.
- Allow for supervised tasting if the child shows interest.

Preschool age (3+)

- Wash, peel and prepare the vegetables for cooking.
- Observe how the vegetables change from their whole form to cooked.
- Mash the vegetables to form a simple dish e.g. mashed potato.
- Children can choose to add herbs from the garden or other seasonings.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- ⊞ Sort and classify vegetables by colour, texture and size.
- ⊞ Explore different ways of cooking and preparing vegetables, and how these processes can change the colour, scent and taste.
- ⊞ Compare vegetables before and after the cooking process.
- ⊞ Experiment with different utensils and how different utensils can change the texture.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

- Offer gloves or a range of utensils, such as scoops and spoons, to support engagement.
- Children should not be expected to touch or taste the vegetables.
- Ensure cloths and towels are available for children to wash and wipe their hands during the experience.

Visual support

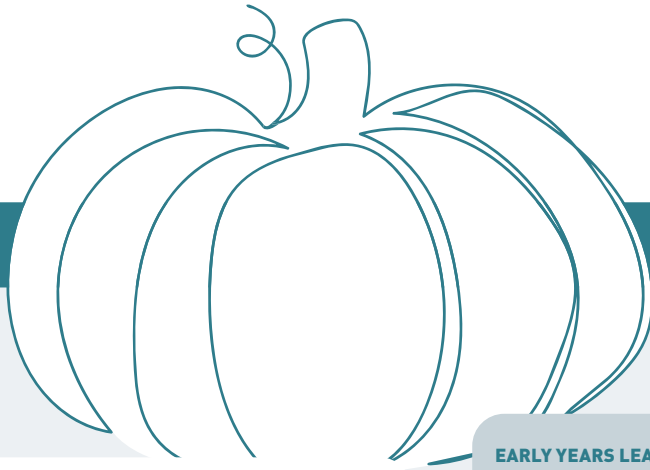
Use visual supports to sequence the steps involved in the experience, e.g. wash, peel, cook, mash and mix.

Engagement

- Consider what participation may look like for each individual child and whether they may engage best independently, in a small group or with 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to participate, recognising that observing is also a valid form of engagement.
- Provide children with choice around which vegetables and utensils they wish to use.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

**RESOURCES**

- ❑ A variety of cooked vegetables, such as pumpkin, sweet potato, potato and beetroot.
- ❑ Individual bowls or trays for each child
- ❑ Spoons
- ❑ Potato mashers
- ❑ Small scoops or serving utensils
- ❑ Child-safe knives and peelers
- ❑ Chopping boards
- ❑ Small bowls for mixing
- ❑ Cloths or towels for cleaning hands and surfaces
- ❑ Gloves

CONNECTION TO THEME**Sustainability***Environmental*

- Compost scraps
- Explore different ways of using all parts of the vegetable to reduce food waste.

Economic

- Schedule close to mealtimes, or in place of a meal, to reduce extra food preparation.

Cultural diversity

- Explore how vegetables are prepared, cooked and enjoyed in different cultures and family traditions.

Seasonality

- Use vegetables that are in season to explore the colours, flavours and textures available at different times of the year.
- Discuss where vegetables come from and notice how the vegetables available may change throughout the seasons.
- Explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seasonal knowledge.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK**Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

- Deciding how to mash and mix builds autonomy.
- Completing a task independently builds pride and confidence.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Sharing tools like mashers and spoons builds turn-taking and cooperation.
- Working with real food builds understanding of where it comes from.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Exploring different textures builds comfort with a range of food experiences.
- Controlling tools to mash, mix and spread builds hand-eye coordination.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Figuring out how much pressure to apply with a masher or spoon builds problem-solving and persistence.
- Observing food change from solid to smooth or lumpy puree builds curiosity and scientific thinking.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Describing what they feel, see and taste builds vocabulary.
- Facial expressions, gestures and sounds let babies and toddlers communicate their reactions before they have words.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|---|--|
| • <i>Oliver's Vegetables</i>
Vivian French | • <i>Eating the Alphabet</i>
Lois Ehlert |
| • <i>Growing Vegetable Soup</i>
Lois Ehlert | • <i>Handa's Surprise</i>
Eileen Browne |
| • <i>A Year in Our New Garden</i>
Gerda Muller | • <i>Rah, Rah, Radishes!</i>
April Pulley Sayre |
| • <i>I Eat Vegetables</i>
Hannah Tofts | |

Experiences involving art

Experience 1: Exploring colour through food

Food can be the perfect gateway to explore the Arts. Natural ingredients offer vibrant colours, symmetry and shapes, and scents and textures that inspire young artists. These experiences focus on edible paint exploration while supporting creative expression, experimentation, sustainability and cultural connection. Children engage in sensory-rich exploration that integrates art, science and food in meaningful ways.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. yoghurt, fruits, vegetables, cornflour, spices).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

Yoghurt painting

- Babies can sit in highchairs or low tables and chairs.
- Secure paper to highchair trays or table.
- In shallow trays or bowls, place a tablespoon of yogurt.
- Add natural colouring such as beetroot juice, spinach puree, mashed blueberries, mashed avocado.
- Model mixing the colouring into the yoghurt.
- Encourage gentle exploration with fingers.
- Model mark making on the paper.
- Mouthing and eating during this experience is encouraged if the child shows interest.
- Model vocabulary such as soft, smooth, cold, pink, green.

Toddlers (2-3)

Fruit and vegetable painting

- Gather food offcuts from meal preparation, e.g. celery ends, carrot tops, capsicum bottoms, corn cobs, etc.
- Prepare cornflour paint in shallow trays by adding cornflour, water and edible food colouring.
- Invite children to dip offcut food into paint and print patterns and shapes.
- Model descriptive language throughout the process (stamp, press, pattern, mix).

Preschool age (3+)

Spice painting

- Provide spices such as turmeric, paprika, cocoa, cinnamon, curry powder etc.
- Invite children to mix the spices with small amounts of water to create a paint paste.
- Encourage experimentation with mark making techniques on paper. Explore the different scents, colours and textures.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Invite children to create their own recipes for spice paint.
- Experiment with mixing spaces to create new colours.
- Compare natural pigments with store-bought paints.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

- Offer 1 or 2 colours at a time to reduce visual overwhelm.
- Provide options to engage independently with separate paper and trays.
- Offer tools such as paintbrushes, rollers and stamps for tactile sensitive children.
- Ensure cloth or towel available to wipe hands.
- Offer scent free paint options for children sensitive to smells or select a milder spice.

Visual supports

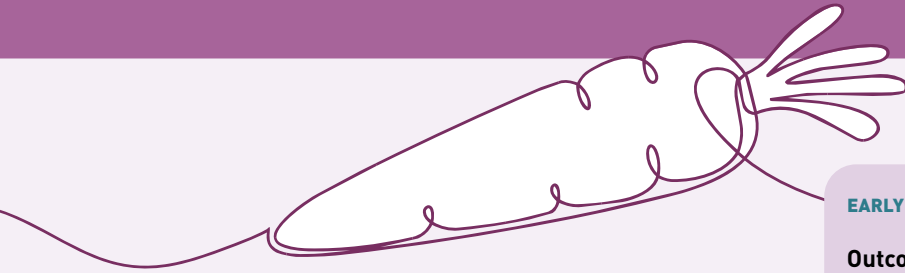
Provide a visual sequence to represent the steps involved i.e. scoop, mix, paint.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

Engagement

Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Would they respond better to small groups or 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.

**RESOURCES**

- Yoghurt
- Beetroot juice, spinach puree, mashed blueberries, mashed avocado (for colour)
- Food offcuts such as celery ends, carrot tops, capsicum bottoms, corn cobs
- Cornflour
- Spices such as turmeric, paprika, cocoa, cinnamon, curry powder
- Mixing bowls, spoons, paint brushes, trays, paper

CONNECTION TO THEME**Sustainability***Environmental*

- Reuse fruit and vegetable offcuts.
- Compost offcuts after use.
- Encourage safe tasting exploration.
- Explore plant-based pigments and dyes.

Economic

- Make paint from food scraps and spices to reduce the need for store-bought art materials.

Cultural diversity

- Explore spices from diverse cultures.
- Investigate traditional uses of natural dyes.
- Discuss how colour and food are represented in celebrations and art.

Seasonality

- Discuss how seasonal fruits and vegetables influence colour availability.
- Explore which fruits and vegetables (and colours) are in season.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK**Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

- Taste-safe exploration supports infants and toddlers who naturally explore the world through their mouths.
- Reflecting ideas and preferences through marks and patterns builds self-expression.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Exploring cultural foods builds respect for diverse backgrounds.
- Composting food scraps builds environmental responsibility.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Manipulating textures builds sensory awareness with movement.
- Handling raw vegetables builds confidence and familiarity with food.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Investigating natural patterns builds curiosity and early maths thinking.
- Interacting with unconventional art materials builds curiosity and persistence.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Vegetable prints build understanding of early symbol systems.
- Communicating preferences non-verbally builds early communication skills.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|--|--|
| • <i>Planting a Rainbow</i>
Lois Ehlert | • <i>Jamberry</i>
Bruce Degen |
| • <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i>
Eric Carle | • <i>More Blueberries!</i>
Susan Musgrave |
| • <i>Eat Your Superpowers!</i>
Toni Buzzeo | • <i>Edible Colours</i>
Jennifer Vogel Bass |
| • <i>I Can Eat a Rainbow</i>
Olena Rose | |

Experiences involving art

Experience 2: My food, my story, my identity

This art-based food experience explores foods that are important to the child and foods that are important to their families. It connects food, identity, and cultural diversity to provide a medium for creative expression.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. wheat-based salt dough).

See Section 2, page 57

Babies (Birth-2)

- Invite families to send in photos of their child's favourite foods.
- Create a class book using children's faces and photos of their favourite foods e.g. "Oliver's favourite food is strawberries", "Mia loves sushi".
- Encourage mark making using edible paint to contribute to their page
- Include textured material to match the food where possible (e.g. soft felt for bread, bumpy paper for pineapple).
- Encourage children to create their own artwork using colours that represent their favourite food.
- Read the completed book during mealtimes to spark interest and conversations.

Toddlers (2-3)

- Invite families to send in a photo of their child's favourite meal along with a simple recipe.
- Support children to reconstruct their meal using clay or salt dough.
- Display the photo, recipe and finished clay creation together.
- Encourage children to share who cooks the meal at home and when they eat it.

Preschool age (3+)

- Invite children to draw a self-portrait on A3 paper, card or canvas.
- Around the self-portrait, children draw or collage their favourite foods.
- Educators document, scribe, or voice record children explaining what food they have included and why it is important to them.
- Attach scribed input or generate QR codes linking to audio recordings.
- Display finished portraits around the kitchen dramatic play area.

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

- Some neurodivergent children have strong sensitivities and trauma around food. Allow for imaginative choices when sharing their favourite food. This can be rephrased as "a food I like to look at" or "a food from my home".
- Offer tools such as cups, paint brushes and spoons to support children who are tactile defensive.
- Provide gloves.

Visual support

Provide a visual sequence to represent the steps involved i.e. roll, pinch, make circle.

Motor skills

- Provide a range of options, such as a pre-drawn face template, so all children can participate in a way that suits them.
- Invite children to collage or use loose parts to complete portrait. These can then be photographed.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

Engagement

Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Would they respond better to small groups or 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Create a centre cookbook titled 'Our Food Stories'.
- Compare similarities and differences between children's food experiences.
- Extend into dramatic play by including children's favourite foods in menus.



RESOURCES

- Photos and recipes from home
- Edible paint [See Section 3, page 83](#)
- Textured material and paper
- Digital device for recording child voice (optional)

CONNECTION TO THEME

 Sustainability

Environmental

- Use of recycled materials for collage and artworks.
- Discuss where food comes from.
- Explore plant-based versus packaged foods.

 Cultural diversity

- Explore foods and traditions from diverse cultures.
- Discuss why our favourite foods are important to us.
- Invite families to share cultural food traditions and celebration meals.
- Support a strong sense of identity and belonging.
- Learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander food knowledge and traditions, alongside families' own cultural food stories.

 Seasonality

- Compare seasonal foods eaten at home.
- Explore local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seasonal knowledge.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Seeing their own family and favourite meals featured affirms who they are and where they come from.
- Sharing family recipes and food traditions affirms a child's cultural heritage.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Books made from home recipes build a bridge between home and the service.
- Sharing food traditions with families and educators builds connection and community.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Sharing family photos and home food builds confidence and a sense of belonging.
- Using clay or salt-dough to reconstruct meals builds self-expression.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Mixing paint shades to match their food builds experimentation.
- Representing favourite food through drawing, collage and paint builds creativity.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Recipes and photos from home build early literacy through real-world texts.
- Recording their voice via QR codes builds understanding of digital tools for expression.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|--|--|
| • <i>No Kimchi for Me</i>
Aram Kim | • <i>We're Going On a Picnic!</i>
Pat Hutchins |
| • <i>A Taste Adventure with</i>
<i>Melissa Leong</i>
Melissa Leong | • <i>Let's Eat!</i>
Ana Zamorano & Julie Vivas |
| • <i>Stay for Dinner</i>
Sandhya Parappukkaran & Michaelle Pereira | • <i>What's Cooking at 10 Garden Street?</i>
Felicitia Sala |

Experiences for services without garden access

Experience 1: Indoor potato patch

This experience connects the concept from soil to plate. However, it does not need a garden. You do not need a garden to grow and harvest potatoes. It can be done inside or undercover using a large dark plastic tub or bucket. Children can engage in this hands-on, sensory-rich and sustainable experience whilst learning the fundamentals of plant growth.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. potato).

See Section 2, page 57

Note: Remember to check your local food safety regulations in your jurisdiction before planning this experience.

See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75

Babies (Birth-2)

- Explore potatoes and seed potatoes.
- Encourage supervised sensory exploration.
- Observe and draw attention to the potato "eyes" growing over time.
- Include potatoes and seed potatoes in a sensory basket with leaves, soil, watering cans, and trowels.
- Model simple language such as "grow", "roots", "soil", and "water".

Toddlers (2-3)

- Plant seed potatoes in a large dark pot filled with soil.
- Count how many seed potatoes are planted.
- Water regularly and observe daily changes.
- Document growth through oral discussion, drawing and photographs:
 - 2-3 weeks (shoots will appear).
 - 6-8 weeks (flowers may become visible).
 - 10-14 weeks (harvest).
- Encourage children to dig gently to uncover potatoes.
- Count potatoes, sort them by size and shape.
- Collaboratively decide how the potatoes will be used:
 - cooking experience.
 - shared with families.
 - "giving" back to the kitchen to use in meals.

Preschool age (3+)

Extending upon the toddler's experience:

- Discuss what plants need to grow (water, soil, sunlight, time).
- Assign daily roles to water, measure and document changes.
- Measure shoots as they begin to appear and document.
- Create observational drawing as changes occur.
- Brainstorm ideas with the children on what to do with potatoes once harvested.
- Discuss and research potato-based recipes.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Create a visual timeline of growth stages.
- Cook a shared meal using harvested potatoes.
- Investigate different varieties of potatoes.
- Compare growth conditions (light vs darker spaces).
- Introduce composting systems using plant waste.

RESOURCES

- Potatoes and seed potatoes
- Large dark pot or tub
- Soil
- Gardening gloves, trowels, watering can



NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES**Sensory support**

- Offer tools such as trowels, scoops or tongs to support children who are tactile defensive.
- Provide gloves.
- Ensure cloth or towel available to wipe hands.

Visual supports

- Make a visual growth chart outlining the process so children know what to expect i.e. plant seeds, water, grow, harvest, eat.
- Allocate a consistent day to check the potatoes and outline this on a daily visual schedule.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

CONNECTION TO THEME**Sustainability***Environmental*

- Explore where food comes from.
- Compost plant waste.
- Reduce reliance on packaged produce.
- Grow potatoes from sprouted kitchen scraps.

Social

- Share harvested potatoes with families and the service community.

Economic

- Grow food indoors using household containers to make food growing accessible without land or cost.

Cultural diversity

- Share family potato recipes.
- Explore potato dishes from different cultures.
- Discuss how staple foods vary across communities.

Seasonality

- Explore why potatoes are typically planted in cooler months.
- Discuss how temperature affects plant growth.
- Compare seasonal growing cycles.

Engagement

- Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Would they respond better to small groups or 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.
- Assign alternative roles if the child does not like getting messy i.e. photographer or waterer.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK**Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

- Caring for the potato patch builds a sense of responsibility.
- Waiting weeks for the potatoes to grow builds patience and commitment.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Working together in the garden builds cooperation and connection.
- Growing food from soil to plate builds understanding of where food comes from.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Sensory exploration with soil and water supports calm engagement.
- Seeing the harvest after weeks of care builds a sense of achievement.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Comparing shoot heights and counting potatoes builds early maths thinking.
- Wondering and researching how plants grow builds curiosity.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Group discussion and wondering builds listening and questioning skills.
- Using camera to observe changes builds understanding of digital tools.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|--|---|
| • <i>The Potato People</i>
Pamela Allen | • <i>Anywhere Farm</i>
Phyllis Root |
| • <i>Where Does My Food Come From?</i>
Annabel Karmel | • <i>Tops and Bottoms</i>
Janet Stevens |
| • <i>Supertato</i>
Sue Hendra | • <i>Rah, Rah, Radishes</i>
April Pulley Sayre |

Experiences for services without garden access

Experience 2: From scrap to sprout

This experience explores how food can regrow from leftovers, offcuts or scraps, such as carrot tops, capsicum cores, spring onion roots and celery bases. Children discover that you do not need a typical garden or soil to grow food. It builds a natural curiosity and challenges prior knowledge, sparking engagement. This experience embeds sustainable practices, plant life cycles and investigative skills.

⚠ These experiences contain potential food allergens (e.g. vegetable scraps).

See Section 2, page 57

See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75

Babies (Birth-2)

- Provide vegetable scraps in a tray or sensory basket for exploration.
- Focus on the textures, smells and visual differences.
- Model descriptive language such as crunchy, smooth, wet, leafy.
- Support children to place scraps in shallow water trays.
- Assist in refilling the water trays each day and observe any changes.

Toddlers (2-3)

- Children to place scraps in shallow trays.
- Use cups, jugs or watering cans to fill up the trays.
- Observe changes in the scraps and measure shoot growth.
- Document changes through drawing, oral retell or photo journals.
- Match the scrap to a full-size image of the vegetable it comes from.

Preschool age (3+)

- Create rosters to water, observe, and document changes to foster responsibility.
- Measure the shoot lengths and make predictions on how quickly and how long they grow.
- Place scraps in a variety of locations (light, shade, warmer areas) and compare results.
- Transplant well sprouted scraps into soil and continue to care for and make observations.
- Hold discussions around food waste, composting and sustainability choices.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

- Create a growth comparison chart.
- Cook with regrown scraps (e.g. spring onions).
- Compare regrown vegetables to store bought ones.
- Observe composting alongside regrowing to compare outcomes.

RESOURCES

- Offcuts or scraps, such as carrot tops, capsicum cores, spring onion roots and celery bases.
- Tray for growing
- Photographs for vegetables

NEUROAFFIRMING AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Sensory support

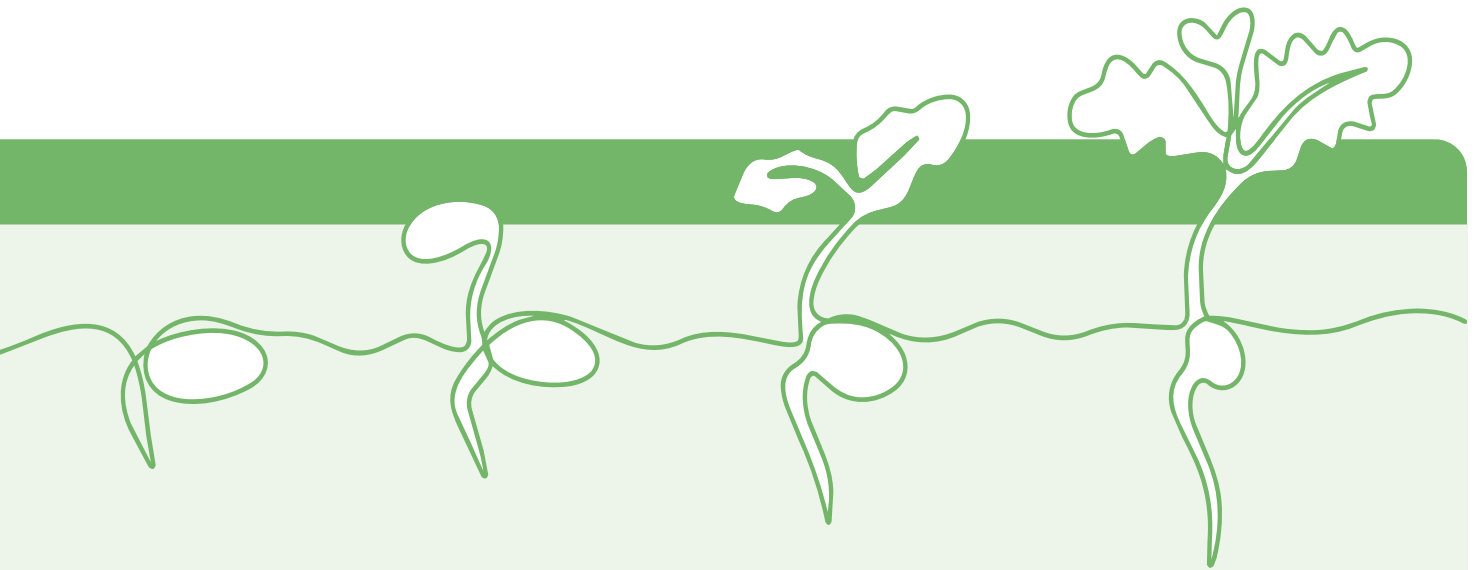
- Offer tools such as cups and spoons to support children who are tactile defensive.
- Provide an individual tray for children who might find shared sensory play overwhelming.
- Provide gloves.
- Ensure cloth or towel available to wipe hands.

Communication

Recognise and respect all forms of communication, including spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, visual supports and AAC devices.

Engagement

Assess what participation looks like for the individual. Would they respond better to small groups or 1:1 support. Ensure there is no pressure to engage in planned experiences, observing is appropriate.



CONNECTION TO THEME

Sustainability
Environmental

- Explore ways to reduce food waste.
- Understand reuse and regeneration.
- Compare composting vs regrowing.

Social

- Share family or community practices for reducing food waste.

Economic

- Explore how food from scraps reduces the need to buy new produce.

Cultural diversity

- Explore how different cultures reduce food waste.
- Share family practices for reusing leftovers in culturally specific ways.

Seasonality

- Discuss how temperature and daylight affect growth.
- Explore how different seasons affect which vegetables regrow.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- | | |
|---|--|
| • <i>Plants Feed Me</i>
Lizzy Rockwell | • <i>Eat the Alphabet</i>
Demetrius Keller |
| • <i>Anywhere Farm</i>
Phyllis Root | • <i>Growing Vegetable Soup</i>
Lois Ehlert |
| • <i>The Carrot Seed</i>
Crocket Johnson | • <i>Planting a Rainbow</i>
Lois Ehlert |

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Engaging in daily care routines builds autonomy and agency.
- Monitoring change and coping when scraps fail to grow builds resilience.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Watching roots and stems regenerate in water or soil builds understanding of plant life cycles.
- Take turns on the watering roster builds a sense of shared responsibility.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

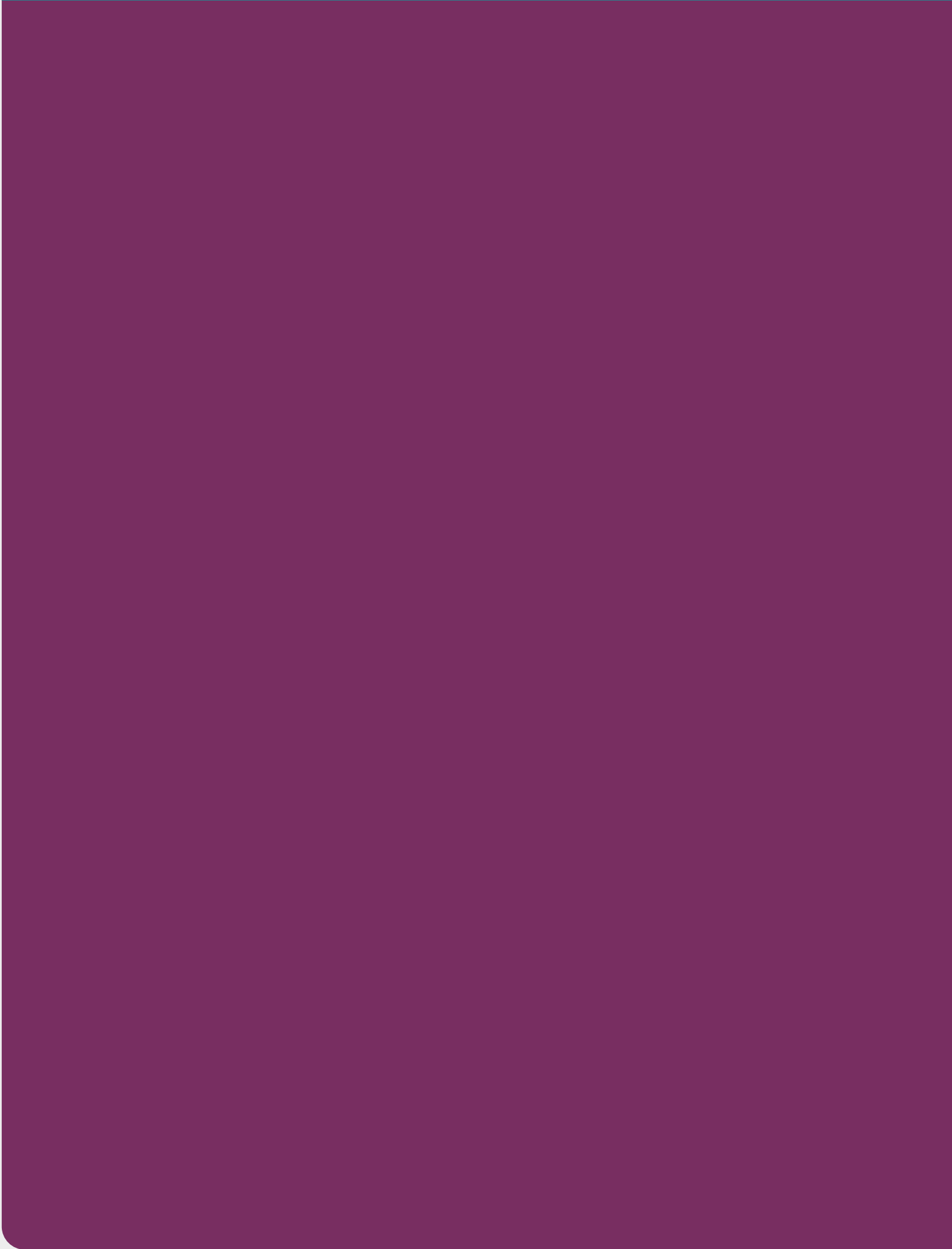
- Observing scraps regenerate builds confidence and familiarity with food.
- Representing observations through art builds fine motor skills.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Measuring and recording growth builds early maths.
- Comparing scrap growth in different locations builds understanding of cause and effect.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Retelling changes through drawing, discussion and photo journals builds expressive language.
- Describing observations builds descriptive vocabulary.



SECTION 4

Extending Learning Opportunities





Learning opportunities for food education can be extended by using available on-site and off-site resources

These opportunities have the most impact when they are planned with intention, embedded into everyday routines rather than treated as one-off events, and give children a real role in growing, choosing, preparing and sharing food.

Returning to the same garden, market or community partner over time builds familiarity and confidence, and linking these experiences back to the service menu and program helps the learning carry across the day.

These resources help children develop a deeper understanding of food, nutrition, sustainability, environmental responsibility and cultural diversity and traditions. They also enhance children's sense of self and belonging as they promote social connection and community involvement.

On-site resources

Traditional foods available in the area. The case study, *Food from home*, explores the creation of traditional bush tucker books to enhance children's learning about cultural foods and traditions.

🕒 See Case study, page 96 of this module

On-site garden at an ECEC service. The case study, *Growing, caring for and cooking plants* outlines the use of an on-site service garden to teach sustainability, life skills and caring for Country.

🕒 See Case study, page 72 of Sustainable Food Practices

Off-site resources

Visits to local community gardens, farms, markets and shops. The case study, *The Community Classroom*, shows how visits to the local park and shops builds children's awareness of environmental responsibility, nutrition and sense of community.

🕒 See Case study, page 94 of this module

Reflective questions



Service Leadership team

- Think of an off-site experience or service you currently engage with. How could this develop into an ongoing partnership? Could it be sustained beyond a single term or year?
- How does your outdoor and on-site environment support children's ongoing access to food-related learning? Are there physical resources or spaces you could develop further?



CASE STUDY

The Community Classroom

Blending environmental responsibility, community connection and food literacy into embedded practice

SERVICE	Craigie Early Learning Centre
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	Birth to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	44
NUMBER OF STAFF	10
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Perth, WA



Background

Craigie Early Learning Centre is located in Perth's northern suburbs. The Reggio Emilia approach guides their educational program, with a focus on family, community and ensuring the child's voice is heard and incorporated into the everyday. Staff describe Craigie Early Learning Centre as "a magical place in a magical place". Part of this is because the community is so kind and welcoming to the children when they see them out and about on their Community Classroom excursions. There is always a friendly face, and a smile and a wave for the children and educators wherever they go.

What did you want to do?

- Help children connect with Country and learn about sustainability and environmental responsibility.
- Help children learn about and connect with their communities.
- Help children understand where their food comes from.
- Community Classroom excursions are now an embedded part of the routine and program at the service.

What did you do?

The Community Classroom journey so far...

The Community Classroom started with walks on Country at the local park. It then expanded to include walks to the local supermarket where elements of Country were explored and integrated into cooking experiences with the children.

This has led to the development of their Chop and Grate program where:

- Children decide what to make for e.g. afternoon tea.
- Children and educators:
 - Look up a recipe together online.
 - Create a shopping list.
 - Head out to the local supermarket to buy the food.
 - Come back and prepare the food together, and sometimes even share it with families at home time.

How does the Community Classroom run?

Educators in the kindy space prepare children for participation in Community Classroom excursions via:

- Talking with the children about safety in the community, formally and informally.
- Teaching body awareness for safety, formally and informally.
- Bringing community members into the service for children to meet before they go out of the centre.
- Inviting the local supermarket to come to the service and talk about the different types of foods they sell (e.g. fresh, frozen, canned, packaged).

Next, children are brought out on Country to:

- Practise these body awareness and safety skills.
- Learn how to care for the environment by being present in nature at the park and observing all the wonderful plants and creatures around.
- Learn how food is grown by watching plants grow in the park and planting their own fruits and vegetables at the centre.
- Find a sense of belonging in the community through seeing the same staff and people when they go out – and saying hello!
- Learn about a variety of foods by exploring the local supermarket.
- Increase literacy and numeracy skills through reading posters, price tags and labels at the supermarket.

What steps are involved?

Before going out:

- If pre-planned – check child permission forms the day before going out.
- If spontaneous – check child permission forms before going out.
- Remind children of safety in the community before going out.
- Allow children to ask questions about the excursion before heading out.
- Put on hats, sunscreen, shoes, get water bottles.
- Roll call/head count.
- Line children up in pairs.
- Staff member at the front of the line reminds children of the process.

While walking to location:

- One staff member at the front, one in the middle and one at the back.
- Prepare children for each section along the way.
- Ensure extra safety around traffic – one of the teachers becomes a crossing guard.
- Roll call/head count multiple times throughout the walk.
- Enjoy the walk and chatting with the children.

What about permission?

The service has ongoing permission forms for excursions, as trips to the local supermarket are a regular part of the weekly routine. If a family would prefer not to give permission, or a child does not want to go out, there is always the option to stay at the service for an alternative activity with other children and staff.

What about supervision?

Up to 15 children go at a time, with three staff members – this is above ratio and helps to ensure the safety of the children and staff.

The difference it has made

These excursions are guided by children's ideas for cooking together, helping them understand they have a voice and can help plan and make decisions.

They provide children an opportunity not just to go shopping, but to also:

- Learn about where food comes from and why it's important to look after the environment.
- Connect with and be part of their community by seeing familiar faces and smiling and waving at people they know.

Top tips

- Organisation and preparation are key to keeping things safe and calm.
- Keep local excursions short:
 - No longer than a five-minute walk.
 - No longer than 15–20 minutes for shopping.
- Don't be afraid to try an excursion:
 - Start small.
 - Plan well.
 - Be well equipped.
 - Invite families so they can join in the experience, and also provide extra supervision.

CASE STUDY

Food from home

Traditional tucker books made for the community in collaboration with public health

**REMOTENESS AREA
CLASSIFICATION**

Very remote

LOCATION

Northern Territory



Background

An Aboriginal Health Practitioner (AHP) in the field of nutrition, who also has a passion for traditional tucker, is in the process of writing two related books that will have a special significance to her and her community on Groote Eylandt, the Warnindilyakwa people. These books will showcase traditional tucker that grows on and around the island through:

- A cookbook for the children and families of Groote Eylandt.
- An educational tool to help health professionals, and the wider community, learn about the traditional tucker of the island.

She was encouraged to take on this project by another NT health professional, a dietitian, who was doing a similar project on the Tiwi Islands.

What does good food education for children look like in community?

She sees that good food education for children in community could occur in several places, for example:

- At schools and in ECEC settings.
- In libraries.
- At health services.
- With the 'Golden Girls' of the community – the Elders who take the children around the island and teach them about traditional tucker.

Other examples she would like to see to enhance food

education for children include:

- Visibility of traditional tucker at the local market gardens, with traditional tucker being sold alongside western foods.
 - This would cement the importance of traditional tucker in children's minds as they would be seen as just as important as other foods at the market.
- Children and families being taught how to recognise traditional tucker and knowing how to use it so they will buy and cook with it.
- Traditional tucker being grown at the community gardens for everyone to plant, raise and use.
 - Children would be able to see the way the plant grows and learn how to look after it and then harvest it.
 - Then they might pick up the cookbook with their families and cook something with the food they had grown.
- She sees the proposed traditional tucker books as resources that could be utilised in any of these settings to enhance food education for children and families.

What do you want to do with these books?

- To share her passion for traditional tucker from Groote Eylandt.
- To ensure that the knowledge of the traditional tucker of the island is passed on to the younger generation and preserved for the future.
- To create contemporary educational tools for the whole community to learn about traditional tucker and how to use it.

What did/will you do to create these books?

- First, she asked for permission from the local Elders.
 - She explained what she wanted to do, then received consent.
- She has a plan over three years to collate the information on the traditional tucker of Groote Eylandt for this book:
 - Year 1 – Plants.
 - Year 2 – Land animals.
 - Year 3 – Sea animals.
 - This process will entail her going around the island and drawing, photographing and collecting samples. She will then:
 - Send samples to a laboratory for nutritional analysis as some of these have not been analysed for a long time.
 - Collate the information into two books.
- She plans for the books to include:
 - Cookbook:
 - Simple recipes for families in plain English and with lots of pictures.
 - Recipes that mix traditional and non-traditional foods and cooking methods.
 - Multicultural meals.
 - Information for families about growing healthy kids.
 - Health practitioner book:
 - Pictures of the foods and their traditional and scientific names.
 - Nutritional information about the plant and how it is used in cooking.
 - Information about how the plant is used in bush medicine.
- She also plans to involve the people of Groote Eylandt in the creation of the books, creating a truly community-based resource.

Top tips

She recommends thinking thoroughly about what you would like to do before you start your community-specific book:

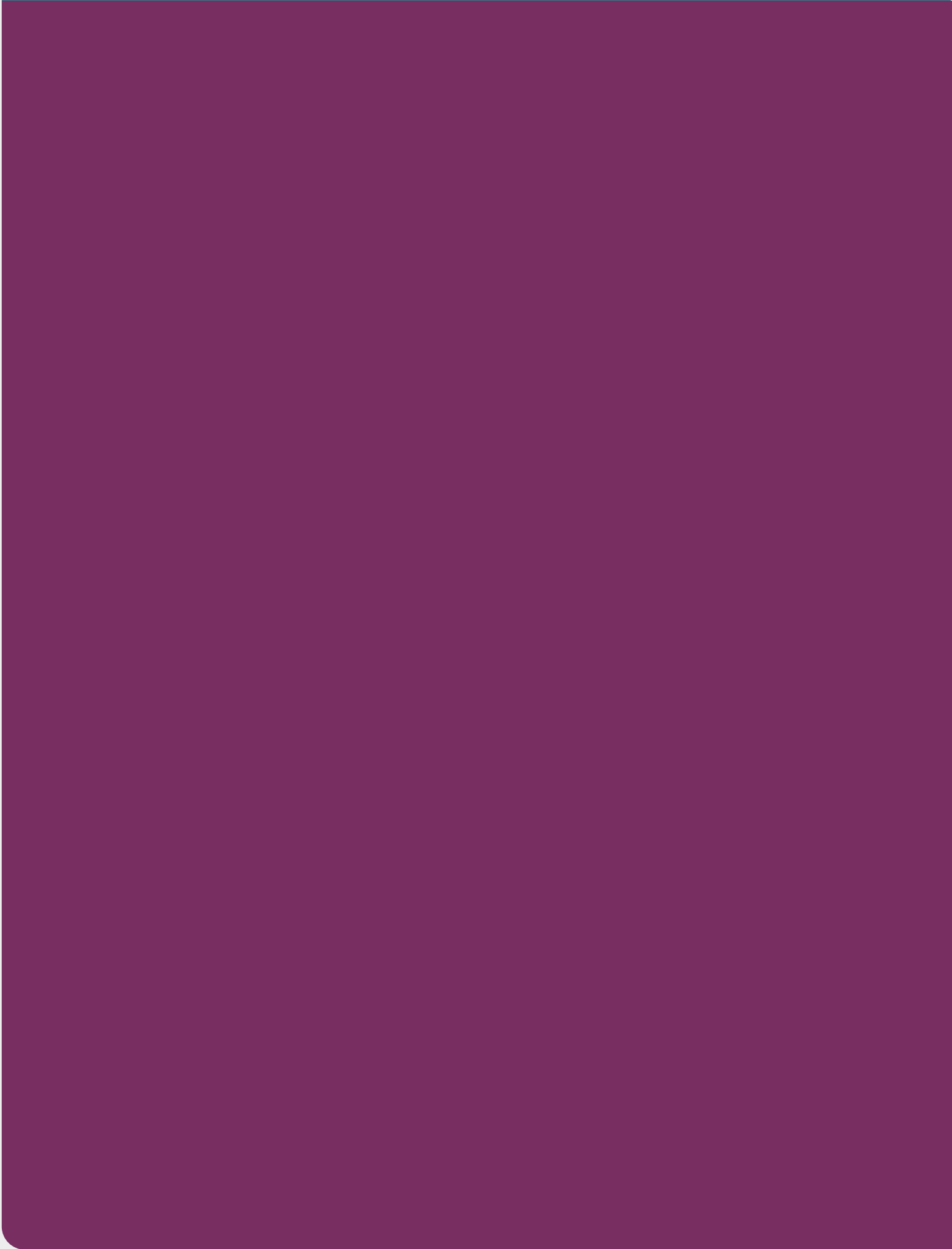
- Think about the people you are creating the book for.
- Ask them what kind of book they would prefer:
 - For example, she describes her mob as visual people, so the cookbook will be created to have as little text as possible, will use plain English, and will have lots of photos to illustrate the steps of meal preparation and the final result.

Work with your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community:

- Go online and find the list of Land Councils.
- Find the Land Council of your local area.
- Contact the Land Council, explain what you are doing, ask for consent to do the work and have community involvement.
- Be prepared that they might say no:
 - In this case you may need to change your plan.
 - Talk to the Land Council and ask what would help to make your project more acceptable to the community and go from there.

When these two books are created, this AHP will have made something that combines ancient knowledge, local community, education and health promotion.

It will be a lasting legacy that is practical, educational, culturally grounded and meaningful – not just for herself, but for the community, families and children of Groote Eylandt.



SECTION 5

Partnerships and Collaboration for Food Education Opportunities





Collaborative and inclusive partnerships

Developing and maintaining collaborative and inclusive partnerships can enrich and enhance food and nutrition education. These partnerships can help make children's food education experiences inclusive and community informed, while supporting both the educational program and menu quality.

Partnerships can be developed with community organisations, cultural groups, and families. The following case studies show how this can look in practice:

Cultural groups

Cooking on Country shows a collaborative partnership between education, community, public health and families.

🔗 See Case study, page 102 of this module

Families

Culture and community co-designed, describes how ECEC staff worked together with families and children to create a community-informed cookbook that also supports the quality and inclusivity of the service's menu.

🔗 See Case study, page 104 of this module

Community organisations

The case study, *Hopping along to Little Joey's Community Garden*, demonstrates a partnership with a local farm to enhance food and nutrition education.

🔗 See Case study, page 106 of this module

The *Nourishing Little Minds*® case study outlines the program and how it was created by nutrition and public health experts in collaboration with early childhood experts to create a resource that was relevant, useable, and empowered ECEC educators to enrich and enhance food and nutrition education in their services.

🔗 See Case study, page 108 of this module

Reflective questions



Educators

- How do you invite family knowledge, recipes and traditions into your food education program in a way that feels genuinely collaborative? How do we help families see the value this holds for their child?

Service leadership team

- Is there a community organisation your service already has a relationship with, even in another context, that could enrich food education if the partnership were extended?
- What would a genuine, reciprocal partnership with a cultural group in your community look like for your food education program?



CASE STUDY

Cooking on Country

Community and allied health partnerships enhancing cultural knowledge, literacy, numeracy and child health and development

SERVICE	Indi Kindi
SERVICE TYPE	Blended – occasional care, mobile
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Not-for-profit, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
AGE RANGE	Birth to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	Ad hoc, average of 5–6 children per day
NUMBER OF STAFF	5–6 educators
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Very remote

LOCATION

Borroloola, Robinson River, Tennant Creek, Mungkarta, NT



Background

Indi Kindi is an on Country, early education program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to five years of age. Established in 2012 by Moriarty Foundation, an ACCO, the program is currently delivered in the Northern Territory communities of Borroloola, Robinson River, Tennant Creek, and Mungkarta.

Indi Kindi incorporates on Country cultural and educational experiences with best-practice, evidence-informed pedagogical approaches, in a unique curriculum called Walking Learning®. This curriculum aligns with the EYLF while also prioritising culturally rich and safe learning for children and families.

Indi Kindi runs three to four times per week, with local Aboriginal educators leading all sessions outdoors on Country, passing down their culture and providing culturally appropriate education. Families are welcome to join any session, and often extended family join the children as well.

Indi Kindi provides transport from the community where educators deliver sessions so that children and families can go together on Country for the day. Learning occurs in 'classrooms without walls', where local Aboriginal educators lead outdoor sessions on Country that foster a deep sense of belonging and cultural connection.

Indi Kindi has evolved from an early literacy initiative into a holistic service that integrates education, health, nutrition, and hygiene.

To improve developmental outcomes, the program embeds critical touchpoints – such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK) developmental assessments and referrals to health professionals – directly into the daily learning flow. Programs are developed and led by community members to ensure cultural safety and relevance.

To ensure equitable and culturally secure access, the program features several key design elements:

- **Community-led governance:** The program is guided by local Community Advisory Groups in Borroloola and Tennant Creek.
- **Local leadership:** Sessions are led by local Aboriginal female educators who act as a bridge between formal curriculum and traditional cultural knowledge, passing down culture to the next generation.
- **Family inclusion:** The service is completely free and provides a bus for pick-ups and drop-offs, encouraging parents, caregivers, and extended family to attend sessions together on Country.

By placing the child at the centre of family and culture, Indi Kindi has achieved transformational impacts, including a significant reduction in the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable when they enter school.

As part of Indi Kindi's Walking Learning® sessions, they provide Cooking on Country experiences so that children and families can learn about traditional food and cooking techniques.

What did you want to do?

Staff at Indi Kindi wanted to:

- Teach children and families about traditional bush foods available in their local area, and how to cook them.
- Teach children and families about bush medicine.
- Bring bush tucker into the program.
- Create early learning practices that are centred in culture.

What did you do?

To get started with Cooking on Country, staff:

- Identified bush foods to bring into the program.
 - Bush foods are incorporated as well as foods purchased locally.
- Worked with nutritionists to plan the menu.
- Introduced new foods slowly to children:
 - Learned skills to introduce foods to children from nutritionists.
 - There is no pressure for children to eat, and the slow introduction of foods helps children to become used to different foods.
- Found fun ways to connect children to the food they eat.
 - For example, decorating crackers using nutritious toppings to make faces and fruit creations for Halloween instead of lollies.

Cooking on Country

Cooking on Country gives children the opportunity to build a deep connection to culture and Country:

- Using bush foods and traditional cooking methods happens organically throughout the day as part of the program:
 - Educators start up the fire and make Johnny Cakes/damper and prepare the bush tucker with the children.
 - Children go fishing with the educators and learn how to catch, prepare and cook the fish:
 - > Educators are role models and teach children in traditional cultural ways, like calling out to ancestors when they go fishing, as part of their cultural development.
 - > Educators take children to collect shellfish for bait and show them how to prepare it to put it on the hook.
 - > This is inquiry-based learning that is also sensory, relational and place-based – a rich learning experience.
- Elder women come to share language and explain the 'why' of cooking on Country.

What about handwashing, food preparation and cleaning up?

Educators take all handwashing equipment with them when they go on Country, and this includes:

- Hand soap.
- Portable basin.
- Hand towels.
- Baby wipes.
- Sanitiser.

For food preparation educators take:

- Gloves.
- Utensils.
- Surface to prepare food.

For clean-up educators take everything they need to rinse dishes, and take them back to the hub for a proper wash after the session:

- Rinsing bucket.
- Rubbish bag.
- Care box – tissues, wipes, first aid, nappies, etc.

Indi Kindi teaches the children that they leave the location as they found it. This teaches them about caring for Country, sustainability and environmental responsibility.

The difference it has made

- Improved developmental and health outcomes for children.
- Educators have become advocates for their community and culture.
- The program helps develop the capacity of children and families to use traditional foods and cooking methods.
- Cultural food and cooking knowledge that may have been lost is being passed on to the next generation.

Top tips

- Work with your local community advisory group before you do anything.
 - They have the knowledge to ensure your program will be culturally appropriate.
- Make connections and build relationships first, before expecting people to come into the service.
 - This takes time and patience, and trust needs to be built.
 - Showing an interest in the stories and language of the area is a great start for this work.
- Cooking on Country has to be responsive to the area in which you are working:
 - For example, desert vs coastal communities will have different cultural foods and cooking methods.
- Build a team from the area.
 - Local women are often the knowledge holders of what to cook on Country and can give guidance on protocols.

CASE STUDY

Culture and community co-designed

The Turtle Cove recipe book

SERVICE	Turtle Cove Wandina Early Learning Centre
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	3 months to 4 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	59
NUMBER OF STAFF	30
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Outer regional

LOCATION

Wandina, WA



Background

Turtle Cove Wandina is one of three Turtle Cove Early Learning Centres and one Turtle Cove Out of School Hours services located in Geraldton, WA. It is a private, for-profit service in outer regional WA. The service is licensed for 59 children each day, with staff rostered to provide education and care according to appropriate ratios. They are a Christian-based service, with kindness, compassion and giving back making up the foundation of the service's values.

The recipe book was borne from the needs of the families and children at the service. The service created a recipe book for families via extensive consultation with the children, families and staff of the service. It reflects the cultural diversity and traditions of the Turtle Cove community that helped to create it, providing a rich resource for sharing and learning, not just about food, but about each other.

The recipe book is still in development but is due to be completed in late 2026.

What did you want to do?

- Staff noticed that families were saying that their child ate well at the service but was not eating nutritious meals at home.
- Families would then ask the staff what the cook was making and ask for recipes.
- Staff would send home recipes with a take-away box of the meal, ensuring the food was handled and stored in line with food safety procedures and local regulations.
 - This way, the family could taste the meal together at home and then make it themselves.
- After doing this for a few years, and reviewing their sustainability practices, staff realised that making these copies of recipes for families was not sustainable, but the need for the recipes was still there.
- So, the idea came about that they should create a recipe book for families.

What did you do?

As part of Turtle Cove Wandina's enrolment process, families are encouraged to fill out a 'Curious about Culture' form where they include their child's favourite foods from home, and cultural meals. These are also included in the centre's menu where possible.

This is a great way to develop an inclusive partnership with families to enrich and enhance food and nutrition education collaboration.

The book was initially only going to contain centre recipes, but over time broadened to include:

- Cultural recipes from families collected over time and via the 'Curious about Culture' forms filled out at enrollment, like Dhal and South African Curry.
- Traditional bush tucker.
- Mealtime practices at the service, like getting children involved in the cooking process.
 - They have found that this encourages children to try the food that they make.
 - Turtle Cove demonstrates this through 'Turtle Tucker Time'.
 - This is regularly scheduled time at the centre where children get involved in preparing food, cooking and tasting experiences.

Steps to creating the community recipe book in collaboration with children and families:

- Staff monitored demand for recipes over time based on how many they were handing out and family feedback.
- Staff then asked if families and children wanted the service's recipes in a book format.
 - Families indicated that they did, so the decision was made to print the cookbook.
- Families, staff and children contributed to the recipes in the book.
 - The book is a collaboration with children drawing their interpretations of the meals, which will then be added to the cookbook.
- Families are then invited to come in and cook with the children on the day their recipe is made.

The difference it has made

- The family response has been overwhelmingly positive.
- Families are reporting that the children are eating more nutritious food at home and that they are cooking together at home more often.
- One parent even came in to watch the cook prepare one of the recipes so that she could learn how to do it herself!

Top tips

The process took around two years to complete. This meant that:

- It was a very organic process, heavily driven by community engagement.
- It didn't feel like extra workload on staff.
- It felt like structure was put in place to support what they were already doing.

The staff at Turtle Cove Wandina recommend working with staff, families and children at the service to develop the recipe book. This ensures:

- It reflects the cultural diversity and traditions of the community.
- Recipes are included that children enjoy eating.
- Community participation and connection are enhanced.
- Children are given the opportunity to contribute in many different ways, like:
 - Suggesting meals to include.
 - Creating artworks to decorate the pages.

All of this works towards increasing community involvement at the service, and a greater understanding and appreciation of a service's diversity, creating a closer, more connected community.

CASE STUDY

Hopping along to Little Joey's Community Garden

Building partnerships to create extended curriculum and learning opportunities

SERVICE	Little Joey's Early Learning Centre
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	6 weeks to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	80
NUMBER OF STAFF	30
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Narre Warren East, VIC



Background

Little Joey's Early Learning Centre is located in the semi-rural area of Narre Warren East in Victoria. They have a lot of space, a lot of time outdoors, and a program called Little Joey's Community Garden, run in partnership with the farm next door.

At the farm, the farmer runs a bush kinder where the children at Little Joey's learn all about where food comes from, how to look after it, harvest it and cook with it. They also learn about the lifecycles of different animals on the farm and enjoy close encounters with them throughout the year.

An element of the Community Garden is the fruit and vegetable garden at the service that is looked after by the staff and children, with excess produce shared with all families at the service.

What did you want to do?

They accepted the invite from the farm to create a partnership in order to:

- Become more embedded in the community.
- Allow children to have a unique farm experience where they also learned about farming and where foods come from.

They established the Community Garden at the service to:

- Bring the gardens back to life around the service.
- Teach children about the process of planting and growing food.
- Build independence and life skills in children.
- Help children understand the importance of growing with the seasons, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seasons.
- Help children understand that they are a part of their environment by being involved in maintaining the garden and collecting food scraps for compost.

See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75

What did you do?

The partnership

This partnership grew over a few years, starting with conversations between the director and the farmer. From there it has grown into a full program, based at the farm, that the children at Little Joey's can enjoy from the start of their time at the service.

Logistics

Fees:

- The Bush Kinder incurs a fee that is included in the childcare fees that parents pay to the service.

Prior to excursion day:

- Risk assessments are completed and appropriate documentation is collected for the adults involved in the excursion (e.g. Working With Children Checks).
- Parents are informed about which day the children will be going to the farm via email.
- Little Joey's uses an ongoing permission system (updated annually) for going to the farm as it is such a regular and embedded experience at the service.

On excursion day:

- As the farm is within walking distance from Little Joey's, the children are able to get there by walking, being carried or going in prams.
- Every age group goes to the farm, including babies.
- In consultation with the service's educators, the farmer sets up activities that are developmentally appropriate for the children to experience.
- The farmer meets the children and staff at the Little Joey's entrance and walks them over to the farm.
- Around 20 children and 3-4 staff attend at a time, sometimes with a parent supporting as well.
- The farmer facilitates the Bush Kinder experience on the farm, with the support of staff.
 - Educators remain to supervise at all times and do not leave children alone with the farmer. This ensures child safety and that the relevant laws and regulations are followed.

Community garden

- To bring the gardens back to life, educators and children plan what they want to grow, and where and when they will plant it.
- Each room is responsible for planting, watering and harvesting produce.
 - These tasks form a part of the daily routine and program in each room.
 - This has now turned into a little competition between the different rooms at the service, with each room trying to grow the most or the best food.
- Some of the plants are grown from seed and are started inside the room for the children to observe, and then planted out into the garden beds outside when they are ready.
- Extra produce is donated to families at the service.
- The director lets families know there is extra produce available by:
 - Emailing families.
 - Placing baskets at the front of the service with signs encouraging families to take whatever they would like.

The difference it has made

- Children have developed an appreciation for the work involved in growing food.
- Children's understanding of food waste has increased as they understand the work involved in getting the food from the garden to the plate.
- Community awareness of the activities of the service has increased, and there has been a boost to the service's reputation.
- Community bonds have been strengthened through the partnership with the farm and sharing excess produce with families.

Top tips

- If you have a special program or project to run, ensure there is a staff or family member with the passion to get it running and keep it going.
- You can have a community garden in the city as well.
- Try using raised beds, plants in pots or plants in hanging baskets instead of a whole garden.
- Create community relationships and partnerships with whatever services and resources are around you. This could be:
 - An aged care facility where the children go and help the residents with their gardens, or the residents come in and tell the children stories.
 - A relationship with the local bakery where they come into the service and cook something with the children.
 - A partnership with the local nursery where nursery staff come in and teach the children about growing something.
- When starting your garden:
 - Know your environment and plan where to put things before planting – you will get better results
 - Get someone in to consult, like a family member or another member of the community who is keen on gardening, to help get the garden off to a great start.

CASE STUDY

Nourishing Little Minds® in ECEC

A positive food exposure program for ECEC, co-developed with the sector

ORGANISATION	Nutrition Australia ACT
ORGANISATION TYPE	Community nutrition organisation
BUSINESS MODEL	Not-for-profit
NUMBER OF ECEC SERVICES REACHED	79
NUMBER OF STAFF REACHED	1,075
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Australian Capital Territory



Background

Nourishing LittleMinds® in ECEC (NLMECEC) is a program that delivers professional development for ECEC educators in long day care and family day care. Aligned with the EYLF, NLMECEC combines early childhood literacy with experiential play-based learning to enrich children's awareness, interest, enjoyment, and exposure to a variety of foods. The program was developed in consultation with the ECEC sector to be relevant, useable, and to help ECEC staff and children build confidence around talking about and exploring different foods.

What did you want to do?

- Support educators to apply a non-food approach to positive food exposure, with a particular emphasis on vegetables, that increases children's curiosity and internal motivation to enjoy these foods:
 - Reduce food neophobia by helping children learn about new foods in a safe and supportive way.
 - Provide children with positive experiences with food via non-food methods.
 - Use engaging food-related activities that pique children's interest and curiosity.
 - Make experiences play-based.
- Upskill ECEC educators with knowledge, skills, and confidence to embed regular food-related activities into centre programming.

What did you do?

Program design

Initial engagement of an expert steering group to ensure the ECEC perspective was central to program development. Advisory Group members were:

- Directors from local ECEC services.
- Children's Education and Care Assurance, ACT Education Directorate.
- Early Childhood Australia representative.

The Advisory Group's role was to guide and advise on program development, ensuring alignment with the EYLF.

The program was designed as educator professional learning, with development of an associated educator manual containing the following sections:

- Learning activities – 13 learning activities each comprising:
 - Links to the EYLF.
 - Instructions on delivering the activity.
 - Relevant associated resources such as literature or templates.
 - Reflection questions for children.
- Book ideas – curated list of children's literature with positive food-related themes.
- Songs and rhymes – curated list of food-related songs and rhymes.
- Food preparation activities – food preparation tips including six basic recipes with educator guide and take-home recipes.

- Family information fact sheets aligned with responsive feeding practices.
- Templates for use in learning activities.
- Links to further resources.

Program pilot

- A grant was procured from ACT Health to fund the development of the project.
- Recruited 79 long day care services in the ACT to pilot the program. Services were engaged through ACT ECEC newsletter mailing list. Invitations to participate were sent out via this list.

Each participating ECEC Service received:

- A two-hour, face to face educator PD session held after hours at the service.
 - This ensured maximum participation.
- A printed Educator Manual with a suite of activities that had been pilot tested previously.
 - These activities were created in collaboration with the project's Steering Group.
 - All of the activities were linked across each of the five Learning Outcomes of the EYLF.
- Resource tub comprising:
 - 12 selected children's storybooks that were most commonly referred to in the Educator Manual.
 - Set of laminated templates from the Educator Manual.
 - Crafting materials (felt, stickers and paddle pop sticks) for group crafting activities during the PD session
- The PD sessions:
 - Focussed on how educators can facilitate play-based food exposure opportunities for children in non-food ways.
 - Allowed time for ECEC educators to brainstorm how they might utilise the resources in their centre and customise them to their needs.
 - Addressed positive language and role modelling around food.

It wasn't nutrition education – it was activities that linked to the EYLF that:

- Exposed children to different foods, vegetables especially, through books, songs, activities and games.
- Brought in elements of food, without it being about playing with or tasting food – e.g. instead of playing Duck, Duck, Goose, we would suggest Carrot, Carrot, Tomato.

Cost

The pilot program was delivered free as it was funded by the ACT Government under the ACT Health, Healthy Canberra Grants Program. Now it is a fee-for-service program.

The educator manual is available online for Nutrition Australia ECEC Food Foundations subscribers.

The difference it has made

After the delivery of NLMECEC to ECEC staff, ECEC directors were contacted for feedback on how the program was running.

After three months:

- Most directors said they loved the training.
- Directors reported that the program was engaging and fun.
- Directors said it gave them agency to follow up activities on the floor.
- There was a positive shift in educators supporting children's curiosity and engagement with food.
- More cooking activities were happening.

After six months, directors reported they were:

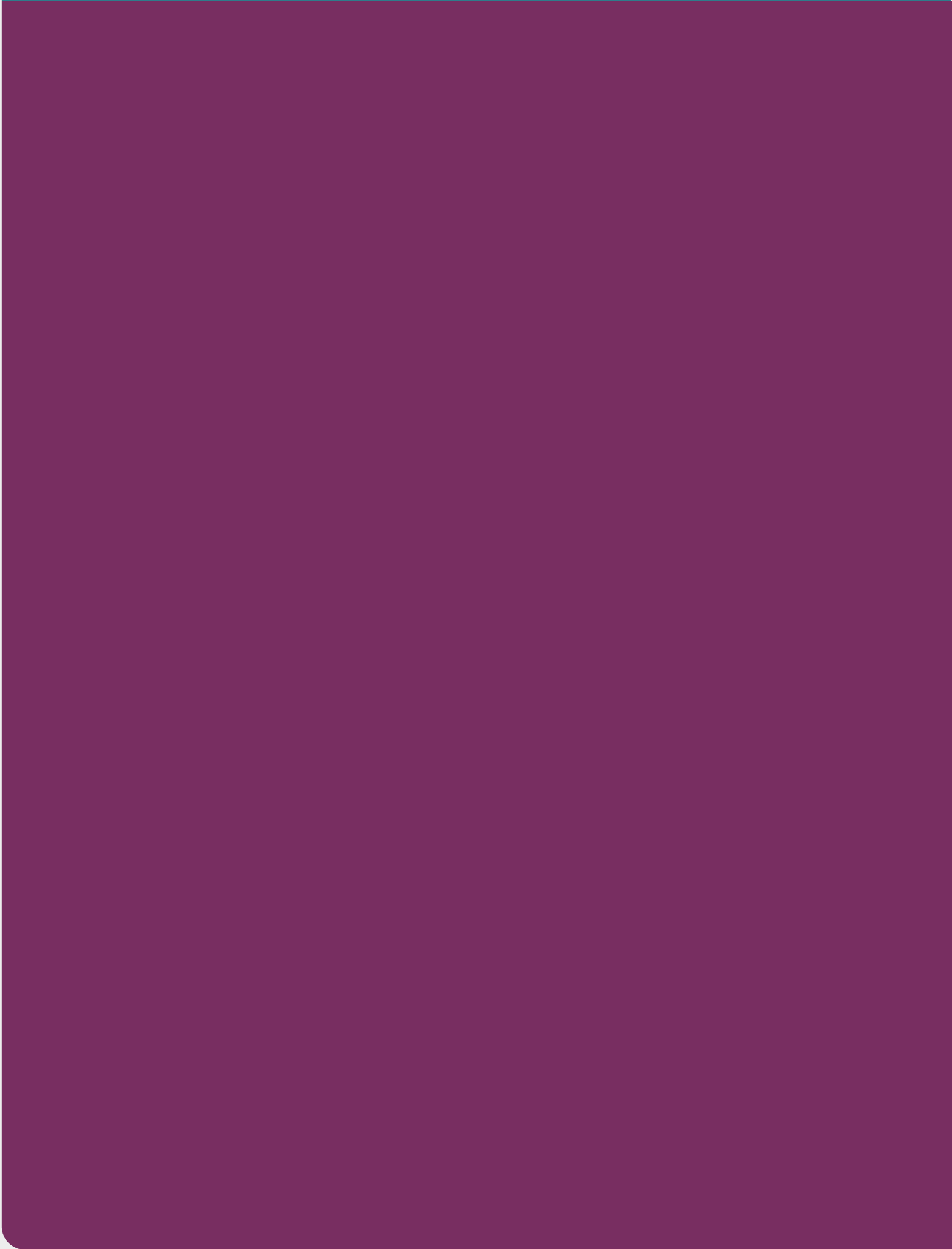
- Still positive about the program.
- Still using the books.
- Noticed educators talking positively around mealtimes.
- The program had been effective in increasing children's positive relationship with food.
- Children were more interested at mealtimes.
- The books and activities helped.

NLMECEC empowered educators to:

- Use the resources and create even more ideas from it.
- Feel they could guide some of these activities and tailor them to their service's needs.
- Increase confidence in how they talk to children about food and implement activities.

Top tips

- ECEC staff are the experts in working with children in the early years of life. It is important to engage with them and get their input to:
 - Ensure the resource is relevant and useful.
 - Learn how to connect with services in the ways that suit them.
 - Ensure activities are developmentally appropriate and feasible within an ECEC setting.
- When conducting face-to-face interactive PD sessions, cap groups at 20 people per session.
- Have a follow up session every year to teach new staff and to reinforce messages with those who have already done the course.



SECTION 6

Appendices



Appendix A – Glossary

Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviation	Full form
AAC	Augmentative and alternative communication
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
BPG	Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
FE	Food Education module
MEP	Mealtime Environment and Practices module
MMQ	Menu and Meal Quality module
NNN-ECEC	National Nutrition Network for Early Childhood Education and Care
NQS	National Quality Standard
OSHC	Outside School Hours Care
SFP	Sustainable Food Practices module

Key terms and definitions

Term	Definition
Artichoke Model	A visual conceptual framework for understanding the whole food environment in Early Childhood Education and Care settings. Like the layers of an artichoke, the model places children's everyday food experiences at the centre, surrounded by the people, places, systems and routines that shape those experiences. The model includes 12 connected 'leaves' grouped into three layers: What (food provided), How (feeding practices and support), and Environmental levers (service conditions).
Best Practice Guide (BPG)	The Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment – a comprehensive guide providing evidence-informed recommendations for creating positive food environments in ECEC settings for children from birth to 5 years.
Developmentally appropriate practice	Practices that align expectations, environments and supports to children's individual developmental stages and capabilities.
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	Care and educational settings for children from birth to 5 years, including long day care, family day care, preschools and kindergartens.
Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)	Australia's national learning framework (version 2.0) that guides early childhood educators in developing high-quality programs for children from birth to 5 years. The framework describes the vision, principles, practices and outcomes essential to support and enhance children's learning, development and wellbeing.
Food allergy	Food allergy is an immune system reaction to a food. Foods that cause an allergic reaction are called food allergens.
Food intolerance	A food intolerance is not the same as a food allergy. A food intolerance does not involve the immune system and is not life threatening.
Food literacy	Food literacy is the knowledge, skills, confidence and practices that help people to plan, select, prepare and eat food in ways that support health and wellbeing. Food literacy develops over time and is shaped by people's experiences, relationships and the food environments around them. ³¹

Term	Definition
'Had enough' cues	Alternative term for satiety cues – the signals a child shows when they are satisfied and have had enough to eat. Examples include slowing eating pace, becoming distracted, pushing food away, or saying 'all done'.
Hunger cues	Signals that indicate a child is hungry and ready to eat. These vary by age and developmental stage and may include crying or fussing (infants), pointing to food, bringing hands to mouth, becoming restless, or verbally requesting food (older children).
Inclusive approach	An approach to mealtimes that recognises children engage with food in diverse ways and adapts to the structural, sensory, familial, cultural and safety factors shaping each child's experience. Inclusion emphasises emotional safety, autonomy, and respect for individual feeding needs, with participation (not consumption) as the primary goal for some children.
National Nutrition Network – ECEC (NNN-ECEC)	A community of practice comprising researchers, practitioners, and government and nongovernment employees who collaborate to improve nutrition and food environments in early childhood education and care settings across Australia. www.nationalnutritionnetwork.com.au
National Quality Standard (NQS)	Australia's national benchmark for quality in education and care services, consisting of seven quality areas including Educational Program and Practice, Children's Health and Safety, Physical Environment, Staffing Arrangements, Relationships with Children, Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities, and Governance and Leadership.
Neurodivergence	Describes differences in how children's brains process information, regulate sensory input and manage emotions. In the context of eating, neurodivergent children may experience food, mealtimes and eating differently, including having heightened or reduced sensory responses to food textures, tastes, smells or the mealtime environment.
Remoteness area	A description of location based on geographical distance from services. ³² Remoteness area classifications are: major cities of Australia, inner regional Australia, outer regional Australia, remote Australia and very remote Australia. ³²
Self-regulation	In the context of eating, this refers to a child's developing capacity to recognise their own hunger and satiety signals and respond by starting to eat when hungry and stopping when satisfied. Self-regulation develops over time with appropriate support and responsive feeding practices.
Sensory sensitivities	Heightened or reduced responses to sensory input including taste, texture, smell, temperature, visual appearance and sounds related to food and mealtimes. Children with sensory sensitivities may find certain foods or mealtime environments overwhelming or uncomfortable.
Service leader	This may include roles such as director, nominated supervisor, coordinator, or other service leadership positions depending on the service structure and jurisdiction.
Trauma-informed approach	An approach that acknowledges some children may be particularly susceptible to feeling unsafe or emotionally dysregulated at mealtimes due to trauma, previous adverse experiences, or other factors. A trauma-informed approach emphasises creating safety, predictability, choice and calm co-regulation to support these vulnerable children.

Appendix B – FE Module Development Process

Stage 1: Scoping

Purpose: To develop the initial topic and question list for the Best practice Guide.

Approach: Using the Artichoke Framework as a basis the following process was completed:

- Alignment of the artichoke model to reduce duplication of themes and sub topics.
- Problem Analysis based on each theme and sub topic of the artichoke model.
- Based on initial problem analysis and associated problem trees adaptation to theme objectives, and associated questions.
- Development of background and foreground questions addressing each problem statement.

Who was involved: Best Practice Guide Project Team

Stage 2: Evidence sourcing, co-design and question refinement

Evidence sourcing and co-design

Purpose: Source relevant evidence (all forms), lived experiences and contexts.

Approach: Using the initial topic and question list Evidence Sourcing, System Mapping and Co-design was undertaken using the following approach:

- Literature reviews.
- Surveys representation from a wide range of centre types (e.g., centre-based care, family daycare), meal provision models (meals provided onsite, lunchbox services) and locations (metropolitan, inner regional, outer regional, remote, very remote).
- Focus groups (ECEC cooks, educators, service leaders and Authorised Officers)
- BPG Advisory Group

Who was involved

- Best Practice Guide Project Team
- Advisory group (review only)
- FE Working Group

Question refinement

Purpose: To review and provide feedback to refine the initial question list for the Best Practice Guide.

Approach: Presentation of the process and associated outputs (i.e, themes and question list) for review and refinement.

Who was involved

- Advisory group (review only)
- FE Working Group

Stage 3: FE Guide development

Purpose: To develop the recommendations, strategies and practices and review associated supporting text for the Best Practice Guide.

Approach	Who was involved
Section 2	
Induction Session and Background Session: To outline the process to date and review the evidence from the evidence sourcing and co-design process outputs.	• FE Working Group • BPG Project Team
FE Workshop 1: To develop the guide recommendation, strategies and background text - Out of Session: Review outputs of previous workshops	• FE Working Group • BPG Project Team
FE Workshop 2: To develop the guide recommendation, strategies and background text - Out of Session: Review outputs of previous workshops	• FE Working Group • BPG Project Team
Section 1 and 3	
Specialist Input	• Education Consultants
Section 4 and 5	
Case studies	• ECEC Services • Nutrition Australia ACT
Review and Design Process: Finalise FE Module	• FE Working Group • BPG Advisory Group • Education Consultants
FE Guide Completed	

Appendix C – Evidence Framework

This Best Practice Guide is evidence-informed, using a comprehensive evidence framework that intentionally draws on multiple forms of evidence. It integrates peer-reviewed research, national and international guidelines, policy and regulatory requirements, and practice-based and lived experience evidence from ECEC educators, families and sector interest holders. Where high-quality research evidence was limited or still emerging, we deliberately incorporated practice wisdom, sector consensus and experiential knowledge so the guidance remained realistic, inclusive and implementable across diverse ECEC contexts.

Purpose	A range of questions were developed in consultation with the project team. The evidence framework guides the sourcing, identifying, selecting and synthesis of evidence to answer these questions		
Types of evidence – all types of evidence were included, including:			
Qualitative	Qualitative research design - Phenomenological - Ethnographic - Grounded theory - Historical - Case study - Action research - Participatory research		
Quantitative	Experimental - Randomised controlled trial - Non-randomised controlled trial - Cross-sectional study	Observational analytical - Observational analytical - Cohort study	Descriptive Case report, case series, case study
Other	- Grey literature (when searches could not answer questions sufficiently) - Best Practice Guide: Focus group interviews - Best Practice Guide Surveys		
Process			
Search strategy	Key search terms were developed by an expert research team specialising in the ECEC food environment, in collaboration with a faculty librarian. Constructs were based on the Population (children aged 0-5), Context (ECEC), Concept (questions to be answered) framework.		
Databases searched	- Medline - CINAHL	- Education source - ERIC	Cochrane
Screening	Articles were imported to the program Covidence for screening. Title and abstract screening excluded articles that were not related to the food environment in ECEC. Full text screening applied the below inclusion and exclusion criteria.		
Inclusion/exclusion criteria	- Studies were included if they aligned with the Population, Context, Concept principles aligned with the research questions outlined. - Date range: published since 2020. Older studies considered “key” evidence were included - Studies were excluded if they were: - not conducted in ECEC - not involving children aged 0-5 - not related to the food environment - not related to one of the questions - more than 5 years old (unless considered a key resource)		
Data extraction (literature reviews)	A structured extraction tool with predefined categories corresponding to each question was utilised to ensure consistency in data extraction		
Synthesis/data analysis	Literature reviews: A narrative synthesis was conducted for each literature review question utilising predefined templates. The templates outlined the information in sections based on the proposed format i.e. definitions, paragraph, image, evidence statement, table and gaps in the literature. Surveys: Descriptive data from surveys (cooks, educators, service leaders and authorised officers) informed focus group questions and discussions. Focus groups: transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis.		

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