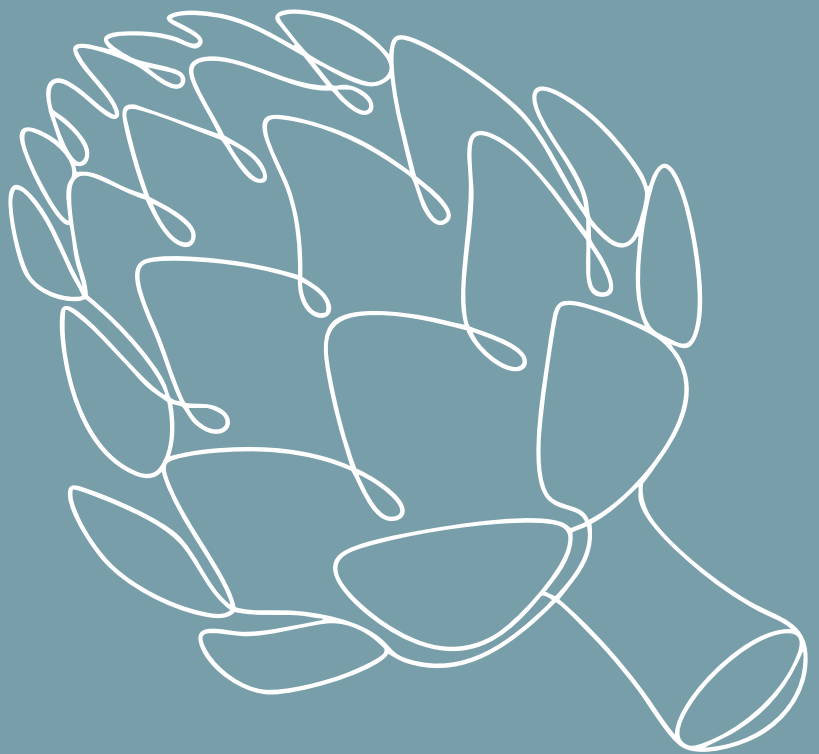




THE BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR
Early Childhood Education
and Care Food Environment

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

Food Education Consortium. (2026). The best practice guide for early childhood education and care food environment: Module 3: Food education (Version 1.0). Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. <https://doi.org/10.25958/d08d-nf30>

Developed as part of the Nurturing Healthy Futures project, funded by Healthway and led by Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. The Guide can be located at: <https://ecec-best-practice-guide.com.au>

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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

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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.

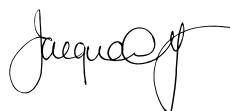
This guide brings together practical, evidence based strategies to help ECEC services reflect and enhance the food environments they offer across metropolitan, regional, and remote communities. Funded by Healthway and delivered by Edith Cowan University, it reflects extensive consultation, research, 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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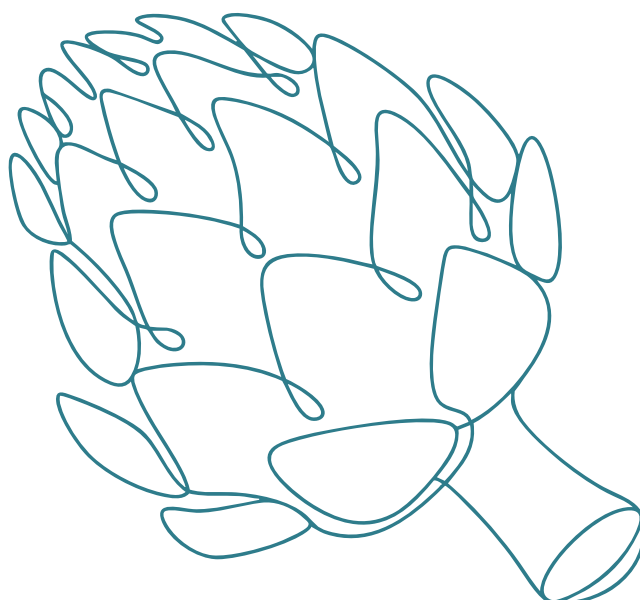
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Background

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.

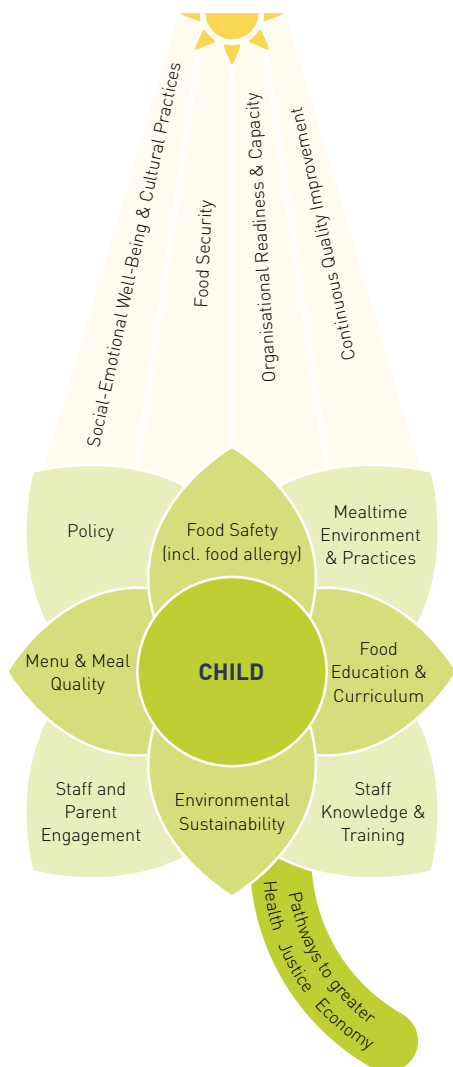
What does it include and why?

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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The Best Practice Guide Project Team conducted interviews for the case studies and vignettes with the following ECEC staff, community, nutrition and health experts to provide on-the-ground examples of food education for children in different contexts:

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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:

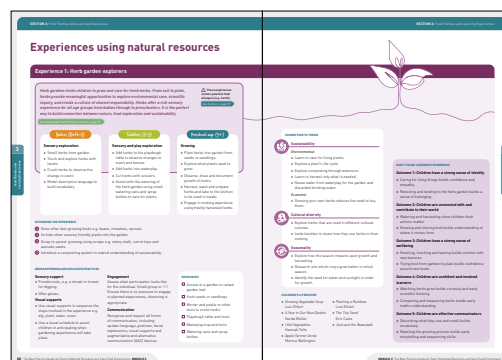
1. Embedding Food-Based Learning in Everyday Practice
2. Cooking and Food Preparation Experiences
3. Food Themes and Learning Experiences
4. Extending Learning Opportunities
5. Partnerships and Collaboration for Food Education and Curriculum Opportunities

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.



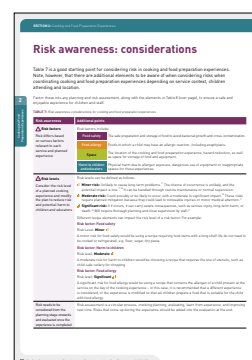
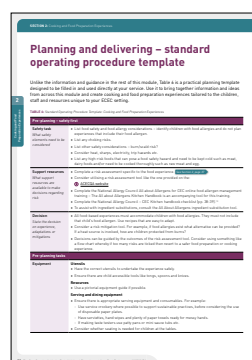
Practical cooking experience ideas

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 pots	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 meat quiches using bread rolls (e.g. 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.		

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.