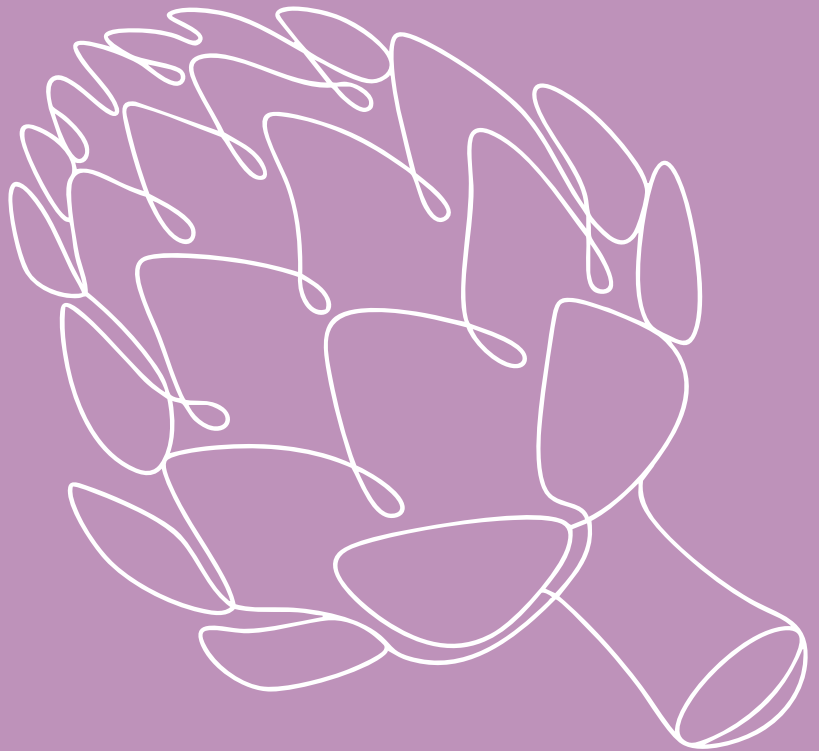




THE BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR
Early Childhood Education
and Care Food Environment

Staff and Family Engagement

MODULE 4



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

Module 4: Staff and Family Engagement

This Staff and Family Engagement (SFE) 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 SFE module provides practical, evidence-informed guidance aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) v2.0 and the National Quality Standard.

Suggested citation

Staff and Family Engagement Consortium. (2026). The best practice guide for early childhood education and care food environment: Module 4: Staff and family engagement (Version 1.0). Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. <https://doi.org/10.25958/6b29-2w56>

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>

© Edith Cowan University 2026

Except where otherwise noted below, this Guide is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0). You are free to share and adapt this material, including for commercial purposes, provided appropriate credit is given, a link to the licence is included, and you indicate if changes were made.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Dr Ros Sambell

Edith Cowan University +61 8 6304 5424
270 Joondalup Drive r.sambell@ecu.edu.au
Joondalup WA 6027

Design & layout: Beckon Designs

Disclaimer

- General guidance for ECEC (birth to 5 years) does not replace medical/dietetic/speech pathology/other allied-health advice.
- 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.
- Follow applicable laws, regulations and service policies, work within the scope of practice.
- References to EYLF/NQS are for alignment; state/territory frameworks may use different terms.

Licence exclusions and use

This Guide is best practice guidance mapped to the National Quality Standard and the Early Years Learning Framework. It is not an accreditation, certification or compliance standard. No service, provider, product, program or course may describe itself as accredited by, certified against, endorsed by or compliant with this Guide. Edith Cowan University encourages adaptations to remain consistent with the intent and purpose of the Guide. Any adaptation must clearly indicate that changes have been made and must not suggest that Edith Cowan University endorses the adaptation or the person or organisation using it.

This Guide includes external links for reference. In providing an external link, Edith Cowan University does not accept responsibility for, or endorse, the content or condition of any of those links. Links were current at the date of publication.

The Creative Commons licence does not apply to the Edith Cowan University or Healthway logos. Third-party material reproduced with permission, including images and quoted material, is not covered by the licence and remains the property of its respective owner.

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.

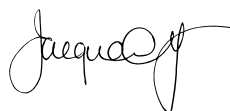
This guide brings together practical, evidence based strategies to help ECEC services reflect and enhance the food environments they offer across metropolitan, regional, and remote communities. Funded by Healthway and delivered by Edith Cowan University, it reflects extensive consultation, research,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

Contents

Foreword	3
Background	6
Setting the scene	12

SECTION 1

Communication with Families around Mealtimes, Meals and Menus

What we know about communication with families when it comes to food environments	16
Communicating with families	18
Communication regarding mealtimes – questions and feedback	20
Feedback to families on mealtimes	24
Communication regarding meals and menus	27
Case study: Communication with families	28

SECTION 2

Services and Educators' Knowledge, Experience and Insights

Various pathways for knowledge sharing	34
--	----

SECTION 3

Referral Pathways – Support, Information, Advice

Referral pathways – support, information, advice	39
Case study: Contacting inclusion support services	42
Case study: Referrals to General Practitioners and allied health practitioners from ECEC services	44
Case study: Trauma-informed and mental health support for mealtimes in long day care services	46
Case study: Referrals to allied health practitioners in family day care services	48

SECTION 4

Supporting Families at Lunchbox Services

Unpacking lunchboxes	52
A holistic approach to lunchboxes	54
Supporting and communicating with families around lunchboxes	55
Safe eating (in the context of lunchboxes)	58

SECTION 5

Supporting Families with Children who Experience Disability

Collaboration with families to support inclusion and reflection of services practices	60
---	----

SECTION 6

Supporting Families of Children with Food Allergies

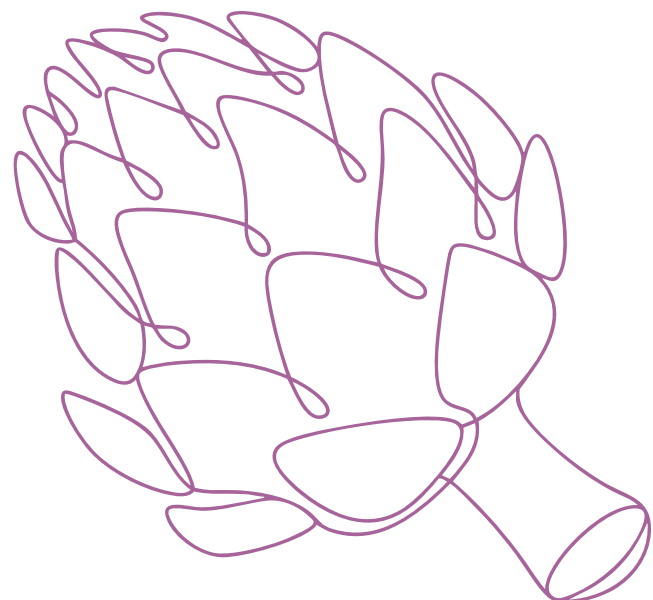
Managing allergies in the ECEC setting	64
--	----

SECTION 7

Appendices

Appendix A – Glossary	70
Appendix B – SFE Module Development Process	71
Appendix C – Evidence Framework	72

References



Background

Engaging with families is a core responsibility of ECEC services and staff. By building positive, personal relationships with families, ECEC staff are able to share concerns or queries about the children in their care in a sensitive way.

One of the more sensitive topics that can come up is food – what they are eating, how much they are eating, their eating behaviours and skills, and everything in between. Through quick conversations at drop-off or via formal communication platforms, services can share a range of information about a child's eating patterns and behaviours, and also gather information from families to better understand the child as they grow.

This Staff and Family Engagement (SFE) module aims to:

- Support ECEC services to confidently discuss mealtimes, the menu, and other food-related topics with families.
- Provide practical strategies to gather knowledge and wisdom from families, to better support their children.
- Strengthen the use of feedback from families to review and improve menus and meals.
- Be the catalyst for critical reflection regarding staff and family engagement, providing support for an inclusive approach to communication.

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 many hours attending ECEC each week, and for many children the food provided in care makes up a substantial share of their daily intake.^{1,2} This creates both a significant responsibility and a genuine opportunity to nourish children well. Australian research consistently shows that many services do not currently meet guidelines for the provision of vegetables, meat and alternatives, and dairy, while discretionary foods are commonly included on menus.

The SFE module was developed to support educators, service leaders and cooks with the knowledge and strategies required to deepen engagement with families about food to support a safe and nourishing environment for the children in their care.

The SFE 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 Model³ 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?

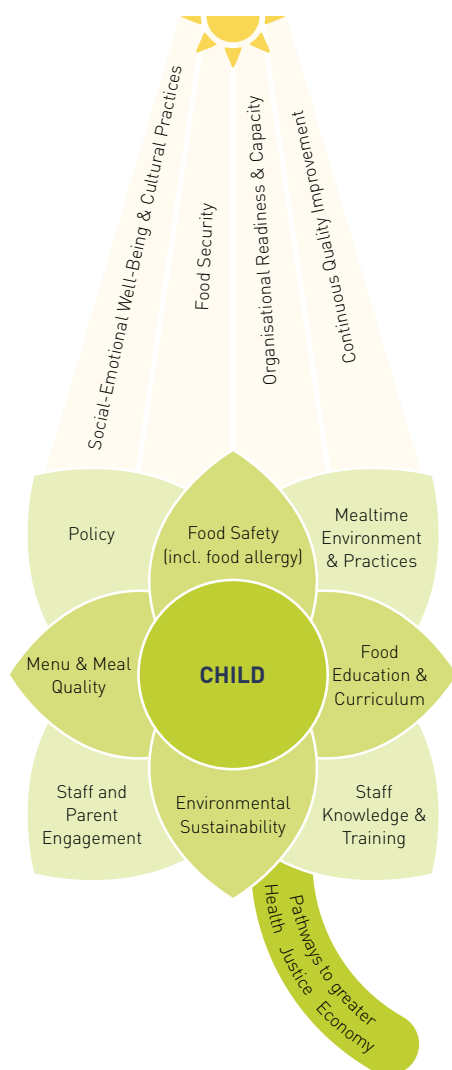
The Artichoke Model was co-designed in 2024 by members of the National Nutrition Network for Early Childhood Education and Care (NNN-ECEC), drawing on their collective experience as researchers, practitioners and policymakers.³ Through collaborative discussion and visual mapping, the group identified 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 SFE?

Within the Artichoke Model, SFE sits mainly in the 'How – feeding practices and support' layer, with strong links to the 'what' and 'environmental levels' layers – in particular the Menu and Meal Quality leaf and the Mealtime Environment and Practices leaf.

The SFE module expands upon a critical element of the ECEC food environment, engaging with families to ensure their voice is heard, and that mealtimes (along with the meals themselves) are physically and emotionally safe for children, while supporting children to see their own family's food reflected at the service and to be curious about the food of others.

Scope of the Staff and Family Engagement (SFE) module

The SFE module focuses on:

- Two-way communication between families and ECEC staff related to meals and mealtimes.
- Providing specific, valuable feedback to families – including raising concerns that may need to be further investigated.
- Utilising inclusive practices to provide a safe environment for all children, and reassurance to their families.
- Proactive strategies to engage families to assist continuous improvement of practice, without creating a burden.

What is not included?

This module does not:

- Replace clinical assessment, diagnosis or treatment for feeding, growth or medical nutrition concerns.
- Replace a child's individual allergy or healthcare/action plan, or advice from a child's treating health team or a dietitian.
- Override existing legislation, regulations, food safety requirements or service policies.
- Focus on outside school hours care (OSHC), although some principles may still be useful in those settings.

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

Acknowledgements

This Staff and Family Engagement (SFE) module was developed through a strong, collaborative co-design process. For the purposes of citation and attribution, members of the Best Practice Guide Project Team, the Staff and Family Engagement Working Group and Best Practice Guide Advisory Group, together with those acknowledged under Workshop Development and Facilitation, Meetings Chair, and Additional Consultation, are collectively recognised as the Staff and Family Engagement 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, public health, government, regulation, peak bodies, training, service delivery, and family perspectives. 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 what truly matters at mealtimes.

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.

Staff and Family Engagement Working Group

Our Working Group (listed alphabetically) brought together parents of children attending ECEC, ECEC educators and service leaders with years of experience engaging with families, and experts in inclusive practice, nutrition, dietetics, and food allergen management.

- **Associate Professor Kathy Cologon**
Associate Director, Children Families, and Communities, Children's Voices Centre, Charles Sturt University, NSW
- **Ms Leanne Elliston**
CEO, Nutrition Australia ACT
- **Ms Lena Harle**
Parent representative
- **Ms Ashton Leach and Ms Courtney Trezona**
Coordinators, Turtle Cove Early Learning Centre (Outer regional WA)
- **Ms Lauren Moore**
Parent representative
- **Dr Merryn Netting**
Paediatric dietitian and food allergy management expert, National Allergy Council

- **Ms Yuna Ribeiro Ferreira Alves**
Educator, Nature's Atelier Early Learning (Regional WA)
- **Dr Ros Sambell**
Chair, National Nutrition Network – Early Childhood Education and Care

Best Practice Guide Advisory Group

Our Advisory Group (listed alphabetically) provided high-level guidance and sector insights across early childhood education, health, nutrition, government and community organisations.

- **Professor Lennie Barblett**
Professor of Early Childhood Education, Edith Cowan University, WA
- **Ms Fiona Champion**
Senior Regulatory Officer, Early Childhood, Regulation and Communication, Metro North, North Lakes, Department of Education, Queensland (QLD)
- **Ms Penelope Clark**
Senior Dietitian (Community), Public Health – Improvement, Department of Health, Tasmania (TAS)
- **Associate Professor Kathy Cologon**
Associate Director, Children Families, and Communities, Children's Voices Centre, Charles Sturt University, NSW
- **Ms Wendy Cook**
Family Day Care Manager, Busselton Family Resource Centre, The Y, WA
- **Ms Katie Dix**
E-Learning Content and Projects Coordinator, Early Childhood Australia
- **Ms Kirsty Elliott**
CEO, Nutrition Australia QLD
- **Ms Leanne Elliston**
CEO, Nutrition Australia ACT
- **Ms Amanda Ferguson**
Project Manager, Foodcore Nutrition Services, WA
- **Ms Ricky Gelman**
Nutrition Lead, National Nutrition Foundation, Victoria (VIC)
- **Ms Jodie Gray**
Quality Manager, Department of Communities, WA
- **Ms Natalie Gulberti**
Director, Education and Care Regulatory Unit, Department of Communities, WA
- **Dr Karen Krist**
Director Food and Nutrition Policy, Department of Health and Aged Care, Australian Government
- **Associate Professor Deana Leahy**
Associate Professor, School of Education, Culture & Society, Monash University, VIC
- **Ms Ciara O'Flaherty**
Principal Policy Officer, Department of Health, WA
- **Dr Ros Sambell**
Chair, National Nutrition Network – Early Childhood Education and Care

- **Mr Blake Stewart**

Manager, Quality Practice and Programs, Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)

- **Ms Aimee Sullivan**

Senior Grants Development Officer, Healthway, WA

- **Dr Suzanne Tamone**

COO, The Creche & Kindergarten Association Limited, QLD

- **Dr Sandra Vale**

CEO, National Allergy Council

- **Dr Jill Whelan**

Principal Project Officer, Early Years Partnership, Strategy and Partnerships, Department of Communities, WA

Case Studies

The Best Practice Guide Project Team conducted an interview for the case study with the following ECEC staff to provide on-the ground examples of staff and family engagement in different contexts:

- **Ms Ashton Leach and Ms Courtney Trezona**

Turtle Cove Early Learning Centre Wandina, outer regional, WA

The Best Practice Guide Project Team

The Best Practice Guide Project Team led the evidence review, sector engagement and content development for this resource.

- **Dr Ros Sambell**

Project Lead, Public Health Nutritionist, Edith Cowan University

- **Professor Amanda Devine**

Professor of Public Health and Nutrition, Edith Cowan University

- **Dr Audrey Elford**

Public Health Nutritionist and Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Edith Cowan University

- **Mr Lochie Clark**

Public Health Nutritionist and Senior Research Officer, Edith Cowan University

- **Ms Connie Ihlein**

Nutritionist and Research Officer, Edith Cowan University

Workshop Development and Facilitation, and Meetings Chair

The development of the overall process and associated workshops, as well as the chairing of the Advisory Group meetings and facilitation of Working Group workshops, was completed by **Dr Helen Alexiou** from the Knowledge Brokering Group.

Secretariat

- **Mr Lochie Clark**

Public Health Nutritionist and Senior Research Officer, Edith Cowan University

Additional Consultation

- **Ms Stacey McKenzie**

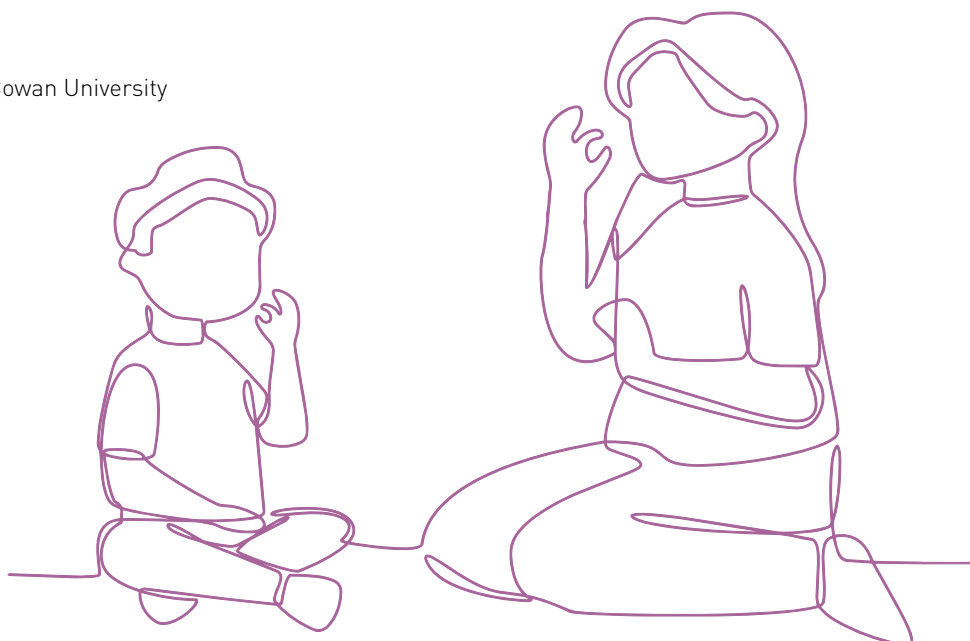
Early Childhood Teacher B.Ed (Early Childhood Studies)

- **Ms Asha Rojahn**

Early Childhood Teacher, B.Ed (Early Childhood Studies), GradCert Autism Studies

- **Mr Henry Tan**

Principal Scientific Officer, Food, Environmental Health Directorate, Public and Aboriginal Health Division, Department of Health, Western Australia



Who this module is for

The SFE module is for people working in ECEC services for children from birth to five years. It applies across centre-based care and family day care. The module includes information helpful to services that provide food to children, with specific detail useful to services where families provide some or all of the food. Table 1 suggests how this module can be used by each audience.

TABLE 1: *How this module can be used by each audience*

Intended users	How they can use this module
Educators and room leaders (including relief and casual staff)	To reflect on current engagement methods utilised with families, and understand the range of information that can be communicated to support mealtimes for each child.
Family day care educators	To adapt strategies to work in family day care setting with smaller number of children and families, creating a sense of community and gathering valuable feedback to support practice.
Service leaders/and educational leaders	To support staff with innovative strategies to communicate with families and plan professional learning and reflective discussions with staff.
Cooks, chefs, food coordinators and kitchen assistants	To increase personal involvement in family communication and plan the menu with family input in mind.
Approved providers and management teams	To support consistent expectations across services, align communication practices with organisational policies, and identify areas where staff may benefit from further support or training.
Allied health partners (e.g. dietitians, nutritionists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists)	To understand how services can proceed with referrals to external health professionals, and consider improving connection with local ECECs to support a strong exchange of knowledge.
Quality and regulatory staff, inclusion support staff and local health promotion officers	To inform assessment and rating observations and guidance, support visits, and resource guidance.
VET and university educators, RTOs and placement supervisors	To integrate staff and family engagement content into training programs, prepare students for food-related discussions with families, and support reflective conversations during placements.

This module supports everyday practice in ECEC and does not replace clinical, medical or dietetic 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

Six sections

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

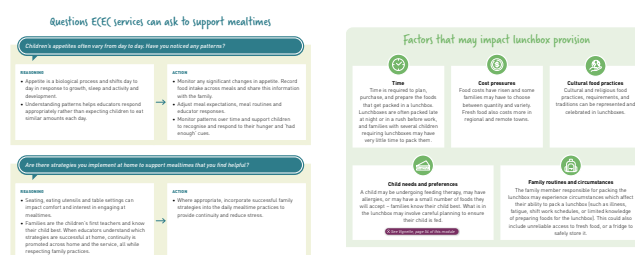
1. Communication with Families Around Mealtimes, Meals and Menus
2. Services and Educators' Knowledge, Experience and Insights
3. Referral Pathways – Support, Information, Advice
4. Supporting Families at Lunchbox Services
5. Supporting Families with Children who Experience Disability
6. Supporting Families of Children with Food Allergies

Elements found across sections

Elements	Examples
----------	----------

Principles and practical strategies

Generally presented in bullet points and found in the following formats:



Vignettes and case studies

A short moment and experience used for reflection, learning and information.

VIGNETTE 3

Day-to-day communication that values participation

At pickup, educators tell Luca's father, "He didn't eat much lunch again." Luca is four, Autistic and often participates in meals by sitting near a trusted educator, smelling food from a distance and eating a familiar item from his lunchbox. His father looks worried and says, "So it was another bad day?" The educator realises that the feedback has focused only on consumption and has missed Luca's progress in participation and regulation.

Response

Day-to-day communication shapes how families understand their child's experiences and how much trust they feel in the service. For some children, participation is a significant achievement even when little food is eaten. This does not mean ignoring nutrition or safety concerns, it means giving families a fuller and more respectful picture of the child's day.

A more inclusive update might be: "Luca ate six of his familiar crackers and sat with the group for about ten minutes today. He smelled the pasta from his seat and we had a peaceful mealtime. When the room became very noisy, Luca chose to move to the quieter table before everyone came back for the story. We noticed he seems more comfortable knowing he has these choices."

If there are concerns about intake, staff can discuss them carefully and in line with service procedures. However, routine feedback should also recognise autonomy, cues, sensory comfort, peer connection and the strategies that support belonging.

Reflective questions

- What do we usually report to families: intake only, or participation, comfort, cues and connection?
- How do we describe children's progress without pressuring them or worrying families unnecessarily?
- What patterns from daily feedback should be used to adjust the environment or routine?

Links to Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard

Show the links to the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standard which are further outlined in appendix D.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 1, Outcome 3

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA5

Reflective questions

To consider in relation to information covered in each section.

Reflective questions

For educators, cooks and leaders

- What does inclusion feel like at the lunch table for this child?
- When a menu is modified to meet needs for food allergies or other medical conditions, is the child also socially included?
- Are alternatives planned as part of the shared experience, or added as an afterthought?
- How do we document participation, comfort and belonging, not only food consumption?

Setting the scene

The Staff and Family Engagement module creates a bridge between the service and the family around food, eating and mealtimes. It offers advice on how services and families can communicate more effectively with each other in the best interests of the child.

It can give services the knowledge and resources to talk confidently with families about a child's time in ECEC including when a child may need a little extra help. Through this communication, there is an opportunity for the service to learn more about the child and for the family to learn more about the food related practices of the service. With this in mind, the module has been underpinned by inclusive approaches, alongside each of the following elements: families as knowledge holders; seeking and respecting children's perspectives, input and feedback; and educators' knowledge, experience and insights.

Families as knowledge holders

Staff and Family Engagement refers to a three-way knowledge flow between the family, the ECEC and the child. By establishing clear communication pathways for knowledge flow between these parties, stronger connections can be made, and trust can be built.

Families know their child, their child's hunger and 'had enough' cues, their cultural and religious food practices, their child's sensory preferences and food allergies, and what works for mealtimes at home. They also hold essential knowledge about what helps their child feel safe, included, respected and able to participate. Family knowledge is especially important in the food environment because food is deeply personal and connected to culture, individual needs and capabilities, health, safety, identity, trauma, poverty and experiences of parenting judgement.

Creating trusting engagement with families as knowledge holders means creating openings for family sharing without pressure and acting on what families share. Enrolment and ongoing dialogue between staff and families are opportunities to gather and document family knowledge in a rich way.

The idea of family is broad and encompasses more than just the person who drops-off or picks up a child. Family includes grandparents, other next of kin, regular caregivers, and Elders, to name a few. Some families have households that are multi-generational. Child and family circumstances can change, and families may be navigating their own struggles and experiences. By creating a partnership where families in all their diversities feel welcome to share their knowledge with staff, and communication is open, this knowledge can be passed on to the ECEC service. The service can then create a supportive environment for children and their families and build continuity between practices in the home and the ECEC environments.

Educators' knowledge, experience and insights

Educators spend a lot of time with children, observing and responding to their individual cues and needs. Their experience extends across multiple children with differing needs making them particularly knowledgeable of a wide range of children in their care.

Both educators and families will carry their own history with food and body image, culture and level of experience with children. It's important to acknowledge this as sometimes these factors can be a barrier to staff and family engagement in ECEC food environments. Engagement between educators and families is built over time, and confidentiality is critical to building trust, especially around sensitive and deeply personal matters.

Seeking and respecting children's perspectives, input and feedback

Children communicate their opinions and perspectives about food in many ways: through words, signs, devices, drawing, movement, gesture, silence, facial expression, behaviour, touch, sound, proximity, refusal, repetition, play, etc.⁴ These signals happen throughout the day, not only at mealtimes, and are how children share what they enjoy, what they are unsure of, and when they have had enough to eat or drink.

Communication is not only speech, children are communicating all the time, and in different ways:

- If a child pushes food away, that is communication.
- If a child leaves the table, that is communication.
- If a child eats only when seated next to a trusted educator, that is communication.
- If a child watches but does not touch, that is communication.
- If a child becomes distressed during cooking experiences, that is communication.
- If a child beams when they can hand out cups, that is communication.
- If a tube-fed child reaches for the lunchbox, the pump, the spoon, sings the song, wants a friend beside them, that is communication.
- If a child refuses food, that is communication, not defiance. Accepting that children may refuse to eat or drink sits at the heart of responsive feeding.

The challenge for caregivers can be learning to listen in the many ways that it takes to understand this communication.

Listening to children means treating all communication as meaningful. Child eating cues or responses (hunger, 'had enough', refusal) are meaningful communications led by a sense of safety and belonging. For example, a child may not want to sit at the table to eat due to fear or uncomfortable feelings around certain food or people, table set up, chairs – anything that could be reasons for a child not engaging in mealtimes. Understanding and documenting children's body cues at mealtimes will help educators to understand children's communication during these times and create a more supportive environment.

Communication will vary as children grow and develop. Even though the methods change, the principles are the same – children are the knowledge holders of their needs, and their perspectives should actively shape food environments. Their input needs to influence what happens throughout the day while they are in care. This might include adapting routines, seating, food experiences, communication, sensory supports, participation options, and expectations in response to what children communicate.

Children should have meaningful ways to participate and give feedback without pressure or coercion. Participation might include watching, touching, smelling, licking, tasting, eating, growing food, helping set the table, sharing cultural knowledge, communicating preferences, or simply being together in a way that feels safe. Child feedback should be actively embedded in the program, with educators intentionally seeking and implementing feedback through meaningful observations, voting, drawings, conversations and collaborative decision making. Children can also provide feedback about portion size, meal preference, garden produce, cultural foods, cooking experiences, mealtime experiences and mealtime sustainable practices. Consider augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and supports that may be required to help a child provide input and feedback in a meaningful way.

Inclusion

In early childhood food environments, engagement is about the relationships, routines and systems that help children and families experience food moments as places of dignity, safety, belonging, joy, participation and trust. Food is never only about food. It is relational, sensory, cultural, medical, emotional and social. It is also an everyday place where children learn to respect (and expect respect regarding their own) bodies, cultures, preferences, communication and needs.

This module begins from an inclusion lens. Inclusion is more than words or the simple presence of a child in the room. Inclusion is something children and families experience in practical, embodied ways: in how adults plan, speak, listen, feed, protect, respond, document and make space for different ways of participating. Inclusion is about all of us – every child and every adult. For staff and families, this means asking not only whether all children are present or technically accommodated, but whether each child is able to belong, contribute, influence what happens and be recognised in all the diverse ways children communicate and engage.

Inclusion in practice

Food environments can be powerful sites of belonging, and can also at times be powerful sites of exclusion. A child may be medically safe but socially excluded. A child may be present at the table but not meaningfully participating. A family may have provided all requested information but still feel judged, exposed or unheard. A service may use inclusive language while routines, menus, celebrations or communication systems are still designed only for some children.

We all want to be inclusive and sometimes this requires us to dig deeper and reflect carefully on practice. Inclusive engagement asks: Are we changing the environment, not only the wording? Are we gathering children's perspectives and actively responding to these? Are we carefully considering what information we gather from families and why? Are we reflecting on who holds power and how we can share power? Are we considering what counts as participation?

Food safety is non-negotiable. This is complex and involves an array of considerations such as food allergen management for children with food allergies, diabetes management, minimising choking risk, texture modification, dysphagia considerations and individual medical or feeding plans. However, safety and inclusion are not opposites. The inclusive question is not "Do we include the child, or do we keep the child safe?" The inclusive question is "How do we design the food environment so that safety, dignity, participation and belonging are held together?"

Practice prompt



Before a food routine, celebration, cooking experience or family communication is finalised, ask:

- *Who could be missing from this moment?*
- *Who can safely participate, and who might be made to feel separate?*
- *What counts as participation here, beyond eating or tasting?*
- *What have children and families told us, and how has it changed what we do?*

Families as knowledge holders

Families are knowledge holders, not just information providers. Families bring deep knowledge of their child's routines, communication, preferences, safety needs, cultural practices, sensory experiences, medical histories, strengths, worries and what has or has not worked elsewhere. Staff are also knowledge holders, holding professional knowledge about early childhood practice, food safety, nutrition, regulation, curriculum, pedagogy and service systems. Inclusive engagement brings these knowledge systems together with humility and respect.

Food-related conversations can be intensely personal.⁵ Questions about what a child eats, how a child feeds, what food is available at home, or how families manage medical or sensory needs can raise complex feelings around culture, poverty, body image, disability, trauma, religion, parenting judgement, family stress and identity. A question that seems simple to a professional may feel loaded to a family, particularly if families have previously experienced stigma, assumptions, ableism, poor communication, lack of respect or repeated pressure to justify their child's needs.

Services should be clear and careful about what information is gathered, why it is needed, who will access it and how it will be used. Families should not have to hand over every detail of their child's body, diagnosis, feeding history, trauma history, family life, finances or routines. Services need to balance gathering genuinely useful information and partnering with families, with careful and thoughtful consideration of what information is actually needed (and what might not be), and what and how questions can be asked respectfully and sensitively. The aim is to gather the information needed to keep the child safe, respected and included, and then to act on it.⁵ In doing so, the intention is to build a strong foundation for connection with families free from judgement and anxiety.

Practice prompt



Before asking a family for information, pause and ask:

- *Why do we need to know this?*
- *How will this information improve the child's safety, participation, dignity or belonging?*
- *Have we explained why we are asking, who needs access, and what will change because of what the family tells us?*

Seeking and respecting children's perspectives, input and feedback

Children are also knowledge holders. Children's perspectives are essential, and children communicate in many ways. Children communicate through words, signs, devices, drawing, movement, gesture, silence, facial expression, behaviour, touch, sound, proximity, refusal, repetition and play. If a child pushes food away, leaves the table, watches but does not touch, becomes distressed during cooking, eats only beside a trusted educator, or reaches for a lunchbox, pump, spoon or song card, all of this is communication.

Listening requires more than noticing; it requires a response. A child's cues, preferences and distress should not be reduced to labels such as fussy, difficult, controlling, non-compliant or attention-seeking. An inclusive lens asks: What is the child experiencing? What are they communicating? What might be overwhelming? What does safety feel like for this child? What would participation look like without coercion? How can we protect dignity while supporting gentle, judgement – and pressure-free food exploration?

Participation may look different for different children. It may include sitting near the group for a short time, touching food with a utensil, smelling from a distance, helping set the table, passing cups, using AAC to choose a role, eating a familiar food while joining the social routine, or being present for the song, story or conversation connected with mealtime. The goal is not sameness. The goal is dignity, belonging, safety, relationship and participation.

Building trust through responsive action

Trust is not built by saying that families are welcome or that children are included. Trust is built when children and families consistently experience the service as respectful, thoughtful, competent, curious in the right ways and accountable.⁶ Rather than asking, "How do we get families to engage?", services can ask, "How do we make engagement feel safe, worthwhile and trustworthy?"

In practice, this means working with families before predictable pressure points arise, so inclusion is not improvised under pressure. Orientation and transition conversations should identify what supports safety and belonging. Day-to-day communication should include quiet celebration of participation, comfort, relationships, preferences and progress, not only what or how much a child ate. When staff listen to a family or child, they should be able to show how that listening changed the environment, routine, menu planning, language, celebration, role, seating, transition, documentation or feedback loop. Diversity is not an exception to plan for; it is the starting point for high-quality food environments.

Reflective questions



- *What does inclusion feel like at the lunch table for this child?*
- *When a menu is modified to meet needs for food allergies or other medical conditions, is the child also socially included?*
- *Are alternatives planned as part of the shared experience, or added as an afterthought?*
- *How do we document participation, comfort and belonging, not only food consumption?*

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

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA5, QA6