



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

Menu and Meal Quality

MODULE 2



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

Module 2: Menu and Meal Quality

This Menu and Meal Quality (MMQ) 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 MMQ module provides practical, evidence-informed guidance aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) v2.0 and the National Quality Standard.

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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.

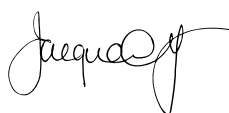
This guide brings together practical, evidence based strategies to help ECEC services reflect and enhance the food environments they offer across metropolitan, regional, and remote communities. Funded by Healthway and delivered by Edith Cowan University, it reflects extensive consultation, research,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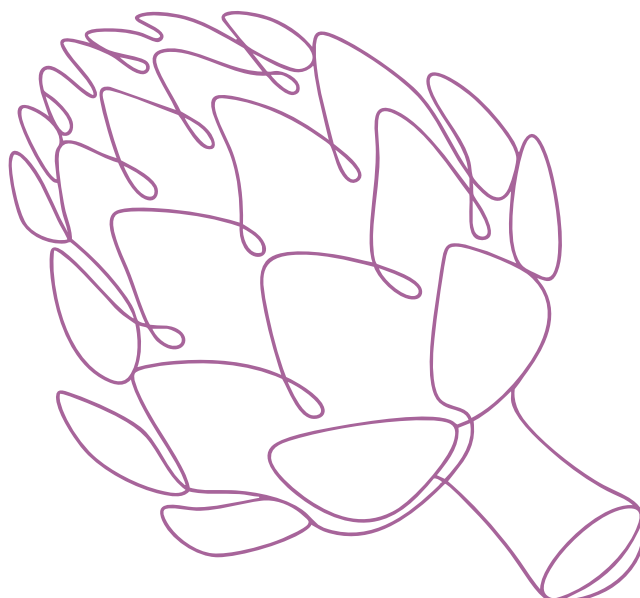
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Background

Menu and meal quality is central to the role early learning settings play in children's growth, development and wellbeing. The food provided across the day shapes children's nutrient intake, their developing relationship with food, and the eating patterns they carry into later life. At the same time, services must balance nutritional quality with food safety, food allergen management and dietary needs, cultural diversity, family expectations, and practical constraints such as budgets, time and access to supplies.

This Menu and Meal Quality (MMQ) module aims to:

- Support ECEC services to provide menus and meals that align with the Australian Dietary Guidelines and the Infant Feeding Guidelines, across the full age range from birth to five years.
- Provide practical guidance on menu planning, meal provision and recipe quality that is realistic for the conditions in which services operate.
- Support responsive feeding and the provision of breastmilk, infant formula and first foods for infants.
- Strengthen the use of feedback from children, educators and families to review and improve menus and meals.
- Support nutritional adequacy and inclusion for children with food allergies, intolerances, medical, cultural and other dietary needs.

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, and for many children the food provided in care makes up a substantial share of their daily intake.¹ 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.^{2,3}

The MMQ module was developed to support cooks, educators and service leaders with the knowledge, tools and conditions needed to provide menus and meals that are nourishing, safe and developmentally appropriate. Further detail on why optimal nutrition matters is provided in the *Setting the scene* section.

The MMQ 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 Model⁴ 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.⁴ 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.

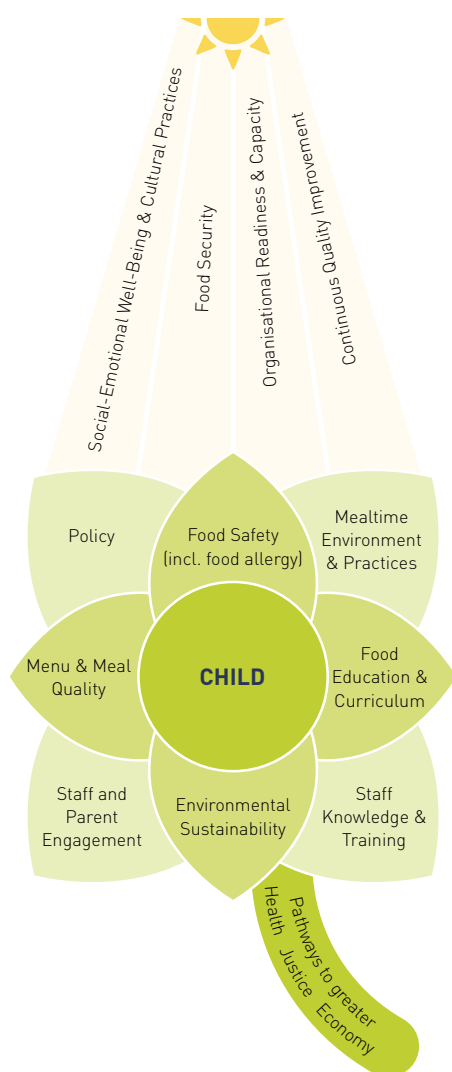
What does it include and why?

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).

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.

FIGURE 1: *The Artichoke Model*



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 MMQ?

Within the Artichoke Model, MMQ sits mainly in the 'What – food provided' layer, alongside Food Safety (including food allergy), Food Education and Curriculum, and Environmental Sustainability, with strong links to the 'how' and 'environmental levers' leaves. For MMQ, the Artichoke Model is a reminder that the quality of menus and meals depends not only on what is planned, but on the conditions that make optimal food provision possible: adequate budgets, time for menu planning, access to nutrition expertise, and strong organisational support. The MMQ module turns this part of the model into practical guidance on planning, preparing and reviewing nutritious menus and meals for children from birth to five years.

Scope of the Menu and Meal Quality (MMQ) module

The MMQ module focuses on:

- The nutritional quality of food and drinks provided to children from birth to five years in ECEC services.
- Menu planning, provision of meals, and recipe quality across the day.
- Feeding and food provision for infants, including support for breastfeeding, infant formula, and the introduction of solid foods.
- Aligning menus and meals with the Australian Dietary Guidelines and the Infant Feeding Guidelines.
- Supporting nutritional adequacy and inclusion for children with food allergy, intolerance, medical, cultural and other dietary needs.
- Using feedback from children, educators and families to review and improve menus and meals.

This module focuses primarily on services that provide food to children. **Services where families provide some or all of the food are supported further in the Staff and Family Engagement module.**

What is not included?

This module does not:

- Provide detailed guidance on the social, emotional, sensory and cultural aspects of mealtimes or on responsive mealtime interactions (these are covered in the Mealtime Environment and Practices module).
- 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 Menu and Meal Quality (MMQ) 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 Menu and Meal Quality 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 Menu and Meal Quality 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, 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.

Menu and Meal Quality Working Group

Our Working Group (listed alphabetically) brought together a number of cooks with years of experience in ECEC food provision, alongside experts in nutrition and dietetics, food allergen management, and service leadership to shape the Menu and Meal Quality module – with a particular focus on the reality of regional and remote services.

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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.

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Case Studies

The Best Practice Guide Project Team conducted interviews for vignette with the following ECEC staff to provide on-the-ground examples of menu and meal quality practices:

- **Ms Lorraine Hingston**
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Best Practice Guide Project Team

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

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Who this module is for

The MMQ 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 is most relevant to services that provide food to children, while remaining 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
Cooks, chefs, food coordinators and kitchen assistants	To plan and prepare menus and meals that align with the dietary guidelines, develop and improve standard recipes, manage food safety and food allergy requirements, and adjust food provision to meet individual dietary needs.
Service leaders/directors and educational leaders	To set and resource expectations for menu and meal quality, support time and budget for menu planning, review menus and the menu cycle, and inform service policies and procedures related to food provision.
Educators and room leaders (including relief and casual staff)	To understand how menus and meals support children's nutrition, offer food and drinks across the day in line with the menu, and contribute feedback on how meals are working for children.
Family day care educators	To plan and provide nutritious menus and meals for mixed-age groups in a home-based setting, and adapt menu planning principles to smaller numbers of children.
Approved providers and management teams	To support consistent menu and meal quality across services, align food provision with organisational policies, and identify where staff may benefit from further support or training.
Allied health partners (e.g. dietitians, nutritionists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists)	To align dietary advice and substitutions with the service's menu, support nutritional adequacy for children with additional needs, and use a shared language with cooks, educators and families about menu and meal quality.
Quality and regulatory staff, inclusion support staff and local health promotion officers	To inform assessment and rating observations and guidance, support visits, and develop resources related to food provision.
VET and university educators, RTOs and placement supervisors	To integrate menu and meal quality content into training programs, prepare students for food provision in ECEC, 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

Eight sections

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

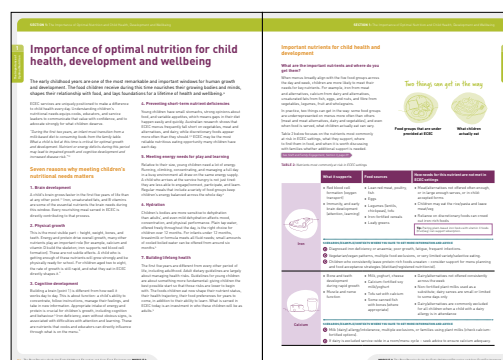
1. The Importance of Optimal Nutrition and Child Health, Development and Wellbeing
2. Australian Dietary Guidelines
3. Australian Infant Feeding Guidelines
4. Introduction of Solid Foods (First Foods)
5. Effective Menu and Meal Planning
6. Menu Planning in Practice
7. Menu and Meal Feedback
8. Food Allergy and Food Safety

Elements found across sections

Elements	Examples
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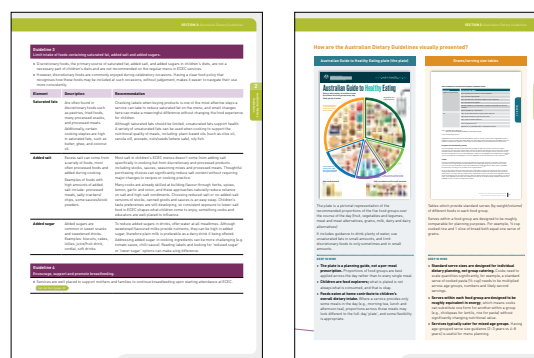
Background

Supporting background information summarising current evidence and providing context to practical strategies and tools used in the guide.



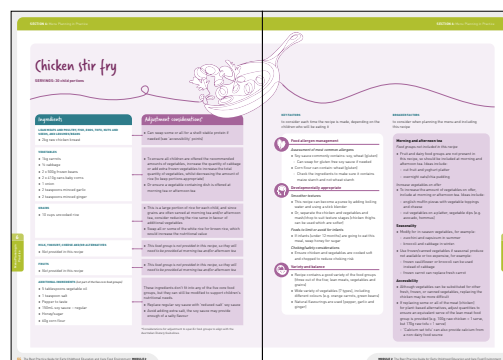
Overview of National Guidelines

Summarising of and sign posting to relevant National Guidelines.



Practical tools

Practical tools underpinned by evidence and aligning to best practice with suggestions for continuous quality improvement.



Reflection questions

To consider in relation to information covered in each section.

Reflective questions

- How confident are our educators, cooks, and leaders in understanding the nutritional needs of infants, toddlers and kindy aged children?
- What assumptions or beliefs about food, nutrition and children's eating behaviours may be influencing our menu planning and mealtime practice?
- Are all 5 food groups represented consistently across our menu cycle, including vegetable, dairy and alternatives and meat/meat alternatives?

Setting the scene

The importance of optimal nutrition for child health, development and wellbeing

The early childhood years are one of the most remarkable and important windows for human growth and development. The food children receive during this time nourishes their growing bodies and minds, shapes their relationship with food, and lays foundations for a lifetime of health and wellbeing.^{5,6} While the Mealtime Environment and Practices module recommends not describing foods as 'healthy/unhealthy', 'good/bad' when speaking with children about food, the provision of nutritious foods that support children's health, development and wellbeing remains a core responsibility of ECEC services.

ECEC services are uniquely positioned to make a difference to child health every day. Understanding children's nutritional needs equips cooks, educators, and service leaders to communicate that value with confidence, and to advocate strongly for what children deserve.

ECEC services have both a significant responsibility and a genuine opportunity

Like hospitals, aged care facilities, and other settings where an organisation holds responsibility for feeding people who cannot independently choose or prepare their own food, ECEC services have both a significant responsibility and a genuine opportunity to shape what children eat during their most important developmental years.⁶ Although some ECEC services request families provide food for their children in lunchboxes, this Menu and Meal Quality module will focus primarily on services that provide food. The Staff & Family Engagement module of the Best Practice Guide covers 'lunchbox services' in more detail.

Australia's ECEC sector reaches a very large number of children each quarter through Child Care Subsidy (CCS) approved services. For example, in the September quarter 2025, 904,760 children attended a CCS-approved long day care or family day care service.¹ On average, these children spend 30 hours per week in care, with many attending up to 50 hours per week.¹

This represents an extraordinary collective opportunity to nourish children well, strengthen families, and invest in long-term community health. Australian research consistently shows that most services do not currently meet guidelines for vegetables, meat and alternatives, and dairy, while discretionary foods are commonly included on menus.^{2,3} Research in Western Australian services has found that even a modest increase in food expenditure of \$0.50 per child per day would meaningfully improve core food group provision, highlighting the strong relationship between resourcing and nutritional quality.⁷

Every improvement in ECEC food provision is ultimately about children, helping them grow well, learn well, feel well, and build eating patterns that support lifelong health. To achieve this consistently, cooks, educators and service leaders need the right conditions to do the job properly: adequate food budgets, allocated time for menu planning, access to nutrition expertise, and strong organisational support, so children receive food provision that is nourishing, safe, and developmentally appropriate.^{2,8}

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA4, QA7

Australian Dietary Guidelines & Australian Infant Feeding Guidelines

The guidance in this Best Practice Guide is based on the best available evidence at the time of development, including the Australian Dietary Guidelines (ADGs) (published 2013) and the Infant Feeding Guidelines (published 2012). Both guidelines are necessary when considering early childhood (e.g. birth to four years and older) nutrition:

- The Australian Dietary Guidelines provide guidance for children aged two years and older (including information around the five food groups, and minimum recommended amounts from each group). [See Section 2, page 20](#)
- The Australian Infant Feeding Guidelines provide guidance for infants from birth to two years (including information on breastfeeding, infant formula, and the introduction of solid foods). [See Section 3, page 30](#)

Expected updates to the Australian Dietary Guidelines

The ADGs are underpinned by Nutrient Reference Values (NRVs).^{6,9} These NRVs draw on specific measures which provide the best available benchmarks for planning menus and assessing nutrient adequacy across population groups. However, it is acknowledged that most NRVs were developed some time ago, and that nutrition science continues to evolve. As new evidence emerges and national guidance is reviewed, these benchmarks may be refined over time. The ADGs are currently under review by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), with updated guidelines scheduled for delivery in 2027 (timing subject to NHMRC processes), and this Best Practice Guide will be updated to reflect revised guidance as it becomes available.

Alignment with Mealtime Environment and Practices Module

Guideline 1 of the ADGs states: *'To achieve and maintain a healthy weight, be physically active and choose amounts of nutritious food and drinks to meet your energy needs. Children should eat sufficient nutritious foods to grow and develop normally.'* Since the publication of the ADGs in 2013, a focus on body weight has evolved to a more contemporary approach focusing on responsive feeding and provision of nutritious foods to support children to eat according to their unique growth and development needs. This aligns with the underlying principles of this Best Practice Guide and the Mealtime Environment and Practices (MEP) module in particular.

For further information regarding food choice, child development, and supporting children to listen to their internal hunger and 'had enough' cues.

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

Additional considerations when menu planning and purchasing foods

Specific populations

ECEC services work with children and families across a wide range of cultural backgrounds, medical conditions, allergies and intolerances, disabilities and dietary patterns, and the ADGs provide a flexible framework that can accommodate this diversity.

The ADGs recommend applying food group guidance by age and adjusting food choices to meet individual nutrient needs.⁶ Where dietary restrictions exist, nutritional adequacy should be maintained through appropriate substitutes.

Supporting children with specific dietary needs is something ECEC services do every day, with considerable skill and care. For straightforward substitutions, the Australian Dietary Guidelines food group framework provides a useful starting point. For example, using calcium-fortified plant-based milks in place of cow's milk (dairy), or utilising legumes and eggs as alternatives where meat is not provided.

Where a child's needs are more complex – such as multiple food allergies, a medical condition affecting intake, or significant feeding difficulties – seeking guidance, in consultation with families, from a dietitian or the child's treating health team is strongly encouraged. Where a child has a food allergy or other medical dietary services should follow the child's ASCIA Action Plan completed by the child's doctor or nurse practitioner. Services should also complete and follow an individualised anaphylaxis care plan in collaboration with the family. Building culturally inclusive menus that reflect the communities a service works with is equally important and entirely consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

When planning a substitution, the following prompts support consistent menu quality:

- Does the replacement still contribute to the food group it is replacing?
- Does it provide a similar key nutrient (for example, energy, calcium, iron, or protein)?
- Is the texture appropriate for the child's age and eating skills?
- Is the substitution culturally and practically acceptable to the child and family?
- Has the change been documented and communicated to educators?

These prompts apply equally to substitutions made for food allergy or intolerance, cultural or religious dietary requirements, dietary patterns such as vegetarian or vegan, medical or developmental needs, and supply or budget constraints.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA6