SECTION 3

Supporting Food Preferences, Food Acceptance and Food Diversity



Supporting food preferences, food acceptance and food diversity

Children's food preferences shift constantly in early childhood, and this is completely normal. A toddler who once ate a wide variety may suddenly become more selective; a preschooler may step back from yesterday's favourite. These changes often prompt questions from families and educators, but they are typical signs of learning, development, growing autonomy, and sensory exploration.

This section explores how to support each child's individual food journey while creating environments that encourage positive, pressure-free food experiences. It provides practical guidance for service leaders, educators and cooks/chefs on offering safe, developmentally appropriate foods, while recognising that "appropriate" looks different for every child and changes as they grow.

Reflective questions

Educators

- *Think of a time when you felt that a child in your care did not eat enough food? How did you respond? Why? What actions could you take to strengthen your practice?*
- *What opportunities do you provide for children to enjoy food with all of their senses during mealtimes?*



Strategies to support food preferences, food acceptance and food diversity

Environment



Create a relaxed, enjoyable mealtime atmosphere and recognise that children eat at different speeds.



Give opportunities for children to enjoy food with all of their senses during mealtimes – this would include allowing children to eat with their hands at times.



Foster shared mealtimes where possible.

Educator Practices



Sit, be present and actively engage with children.



Role model authentic enjoyment of food when appropriate.



Where possible, eat meals with children.



Use neutral language when talking about food. Use language that leaves room for preferences to change, such as "they didn't choose carrots today" rather than "they don't like carrots", and avoid terms such as 'picky eater' as children's food preferences are still developing.



Provide regular and repeated exposure to a variety of foods, without any pressure to eat, as this is crucial for a child to learn to like different foods through using their senses (looking, touching, smelling, tasting, etc.)



Ensure that any feedback is specific to the child, individualised, and not value-labelled; for example, "I noticed you were eating so well with your spoon today", rather than "Good job for eating all of your broccoli".



Allow children to choose what they eat and how much they eat.



Children have the opportunity to learn how to approach food they are not sure about, how to refuse food, and how to decide against finishing a food if they don't like the taste/texture.



Engage sensory experiences by describing foods and asking about sensory characteristics of food.

See Food Education module

TABLE 3: *Food preferences, food acceptance and food diversity strategies*

Strategy	Examples
Create a relaxed, enjoyable mealtime atmosphere and recognise that children eat at different speeds.	• Children may eat at different speeds; some are slow, and some are fast. • It is beneficial to provide 'just right' sensory input for all children (e.g. noise, clutter on tables, competing activities nearby). • The intent is not that every meal has to be enjoyable or exciting, but that mealtimes feel safe, respectful and unhurried. This may help children feel safe to explore new and familiar foods and to interact positively with others at the table.
Give opportunities for children to enjoy food with all of their senses during mealtimes – this would include allowing children to eat with their hands at times.	• A child who is still learning to like a food might 'play' with the food to become more familiar with it. Allow this to happen without pressuring them to taste or eat the food. • For children with sensory processing differences, feeding difficulties or other specific needs, consult with a dietitian, occupational therapist or other relevant professional. • Always consider food safety and allergies – follow individual allergy care plans and be aware of foods being touched.
Foster shared mealtimes where possible.	• Place food and beverages in common serving containers and allow children to serve themselves what and how much they would like to eat. • Close supervision is needed to ensure individual allergy care plans and food safety practices are followed (for example, using separate utensils), and choking risks are mitigated.
Sit, be present and actively engage with children.	• Sit with children at mealtimes, be present, and actively engage in conversation while supervising. • Plan routines to support uninterrupted mealtime presence of staff, especially when staffing is limited – e.g., in family day care, changing nappies before mealtimes so educators can remain with children who are eating.
Role model authentic enjoyment of food when appropriate.	• Educators are trusted adults during mealtimes so they can role model sitting at the table, and give the children opportunities to practice eating a wide variety of foods (which role modelling encourages). • Educators do not need to pretend to like a food they genuinely dislike. Authenticity is important, but negative comments (e.g. 'that's gross', 'I hate that') are avoided so they do not close down children's curiosity or exploration. 'Don't yuck my yum' may be useful. • Other aspects of mealtimes can also be role-modelled by educators, such as taking turns, sharing serving dishes, using cutlery, social conversation and connection, and offering food politely.
Where possible, eat meals with children.	• When educators eat similar foods to the children, it can support children to feel safe trying and tasting those foods; however, this is not always possible and should never be forced. • Drinking water and engaging in conversation during mealtimes still provides role-modelling of positive behaviours. • Services should consider practical barriers to staff eating with children, including not enough food prepared for educators, staff breaks and access to kitchen facilities. • When educators are eating different foods, due to preferences, practical barriers, or special dietary needs (e.g. food allergies, cultural or religious requirements) – Educators can briefly and neutrally explain why their food is different (e.g. 'My food looks a bit different today because of my religion').
Use neutral language when talking about food.	• Use language that leaves room for preferences to change, such as 'they didn't choose carrots today' rather than 'they don't like carrots', and avoid terms such as 'picky eater' as children's food preferences are still developing.

Strategy	Examples
Children can choose what they eat and how much they eat. Regular and repeated exposure to a food, without any pressure to eat, is crucial for a child to learn to like that food through using their senses (looking, touching, smelling, tasting, etc.)	• From the foods and drinks that are offered, children can choose what they eat and how much they eat, without any coercion or pressure to taste or finish anything. • Support caregivers to remember that a) tastes can change over time and that b) some children need to be exposed to a food 8-15 times or more before they might accept it. • Regular exposure can include seeing a food on the table, serving it, smelling it or touching it, as well as tasting it; all of these count as part of learning about that food. • Offer small amounts of unfamiliar foods alongside familiar, accepted foods, so children can explore them at their own pace.
Ensure that any feedback is specific to the child, individualised, and not value-labelled.	• Ensure that any encouragement during mealtimes is not related to amounts or types of foods eaten – keep it task-based, e.g. 'I noticed you were eating so well with your spoon today', rather than 'Good job for eating all of your broccoli'. • Encourage rather than praise children when exploring new foods.
Children have the opportunity to learn how to approach food they are not sure about, how to refuse food, and how to decide against finishing a food if they don't like the taste/texture.	• Regular exposure is crucial for food acceptance. • Explicitly teach "trying steps" and refusal phrases so children can safely approach unfamiliar foods (e.g., "You can look, smell, touch, then decide"; "No thank you"/"Not today"/"Can I have a little bit to try?").
Engage sensory experiences by describing foods and asking about sensory characteristics of food.	• Use "sensory talk" at the table (look, smell, feel, sound) to describe foods without pressure to taste (e.g., "I love the way the broccoli is crunchy, do you like it crunchy or do you like it soft when it is cooked?"). • Ask simple, choice-based sensory questions to build curiosity and vocabulary (e.g., "Is it smooth or bumpy?" "Does it smell strong or mild?" "Would you like to touch it with your finger or your spoon?").

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

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA5

Reflective questions

Service leadership team

- *What are your team's personal beliefs and biases about food? How do they influence the way they offer children repeated, pressure-free exposure to different foods and use of neutral, respectful language during mealtimes?*

Cooks/Nominated supervisor

- *How does the way you plan and serve meals support children to explore a variety of foods without pressure and at their own pace?*