SECTION 5

Effective Menu and Meal Planning



Supporting effective menu planning

What is meant by effective menu planning? What are the elements?

Effective menu/meal planning in ECEC can be defined as a process that involves carefully planning which foods are served at breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and other food opportunities from day-to day and week-to week to ensure a variety of nutritious, safe and balanced meal options that meet children's developmental and nutritional needs.

Effective meal planning is critical as the food prepared and served in ECEC settings can influence lifelong habits and child development outcomes.[37] Elements of effective menu planning in ECEC include:

Adherence to nutritional guidelines

An essential element of effective menu planning is meeting nutritional guidelines. Current benchmarks suggest that children should be offered at least 50% of their daily recommended food group serves at ECEC if morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea are provided. However, if breakfast or late afternoon tea is also provided, the proportion of total daily intake that should be offered increases – reflecting the amount of time children spend in care and the increased number of feeding opportunities.[9,38]

Variety and balance

Planned menus should not only provide enough of each food group but also provide a variety of foods within each food group, providing opportunities for exposure to different tastes, colours, textures and flavours.[9,39,40] In practice, for example, this may look like a two-week menu cycle where main meals are not repeated.[40] This also includes changing which days menu items appear on, so children attending part-time are exposed to a variety of foods.

Developmental appropriateness

Menus should be planned so that they match the attending children's age (including appropriate textures), portion needs and eating skills.[38]

Food allergy and other special dietary requirements

Menu should be planned so they provide appropriate foods for children, including those with food allergies, intolerances, cultural or religious dietary requirements, dietary patterns such as vegetarian or vegan, and medical or developmental dietary needs. The planning, preparation, and adaptation needed to safely implement this is complex and requires detailed knowledge and training. This is especially important to protect the safety of all children.[41]

When preparing meals for children with food allergies, the Food Standards Code requires services to take all practicable measures to prevent the likelihood of the food being contaminated with the relevant allergens.

Cultural and demographic influences

It is important to consider the cultural backgrounds of families in the ECEC community to ensure that planned menus are inclusive. In some services, as part of the onboarding process, they ask families about their cultural backgrounds, and consult with families on appropriate cultural foods. Food access and availability are also important factors to consider.

Food waste and sustainability factors

Effective menu planning is essential when it comes to mitigating food waste. Adjusting the menu plan for the number of children in attendance (not enrolment numbers) can reduce food waste.[42] Ensuring that sufficient amounts of food is prepared, but keeping an eye on portion sizes so as not to overprovide, can limit food waste. In addition, having safe plans for food that was prepared but not served (and therefore not touched) can reduce unnecessary food waste. For example, decanting meals into smaller batches, rather than placing all food out at once, allows untouched portions to be safely refrigerated or frozen for use another day. Planning a menu with sustainability factors in mind, including reduced reliance on packaged food, is an important element of effective menu planning.

Centre budget

Although effective menu planning can reduce food costs, a sufficient budget is crucial to provide food which meets dietary guidelines.[2]

Allocated hours for menu planning

In order to effectively plan a menu, the staff member responsible should be allocated sufficient work time, including access to appropriate tools and equipment (e.g. digital resources).

Periodic menu review

One element of ensuring menus meet nutritional guidelines is reviewing the menu for compliance against guidelines.[2] In-person menu planning support may be available in you area. Further, web-based menu assessment tools can be a useful tool when it comes to assessing the menu and planning a menu that adheres to nutritional guidelines.[43,44]

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA7

What factors influence how service leaders and cooks perceive and prioritise menu and meal quality in practice?

Research in ECEC services across Australia and internationally shows that when the menu is made a priority in the service, it is more likely to meet the nutritional needs of children. The perception of this by cooks and service leaders in a service is shaped by a variety of factors.

Main factors

Whilst a multitude of factors have been shown to impact whether service leaders and cooks perceive menu and meal quality to be a high priority, the two main factors are the **time allocated to menu planning**, and the **food budget**.[41]

See Section 5, page 52

Additional factors

Table 10 below outlines factors that influence how service leaders and cooks perceive and prioritise menu and meal quality in practice, and identifies practical strategies within the guide that may support each factor..

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA7

TABLE 10: *Factors influencing how ECEC staff perceive and prioritise menu and meal quality*

Factor	Influence on how service leaders / cooks perceive and prioritise menu and meal quality in practice
Child health	Cooks and service leaders prioritise providing nutritious foods on the menu to support child health and wellbeing.[44] *See Section 1, page 16*
Children's food preferences	Cooks and service leaders plan menus with input based on what the children at the service like to eat. However, planning menus based on children's food preferences can at times be a barrier to introducing new, nutritious foods that children may not eat until they are familiar with them.[45,46] *See Section 7, page 76* *See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 3, page 31*
Food waste	Some service leaders and cooks raise concerns that providing more nutritious menus, particularly with increased vegetables, could increase food waste.[47,48] However, this is not always the case, careful menu planning based on the number of children attending each day (rather than total enrolments) and responsive feeding practices can mitigate food waste.[42] *See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 4, page 52* *See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 2, page 21*
Whole-of-organisation support	Cooks can be supported by their organisation providing encouragement, access to menu planning tools or resources, and guidance for where to seek assistance.[44,49] *See Section 6, page 56*
Cook/chef training & skills	Many ECEC cooks have not received any training in nutrition, often relying on their own background and experience.[39,46,49,50] When they have received training, they are more likely to plan menus effectively and use menu planning tools.[49] *See Section 6, page 56*
Food allergy requirements	Adjusting menus to meet food allergy requirements is a critical, complex component of menu planning.[41,51] *See Section 8, page 80*
Family requests	Family food requests (e.g. avoiding or providing specific food options) can add further complexity to menu planning. *See Staff and Family Engagement, Section 1, page 27*
Continuous quality improvement	Planning and preparing nutritious meals are an important factor in centres' quality improvement plans.[44] *See Section 6, page 56* *See Section 7, page 76*



Time allocated to menu planning

In many services, cooks/chefs are fully responsible for planning the menu – in addition to preparing and serving at least morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea each day.[2] On average, cooks work 5 hours per day, and menu planning is often expected to be completed within these normal working hours, with **most cooks (94%) having zero to five paid hours allocated each week to menu planning**.[2] For most cooks, this is not enough time to effectively plan a menu that meets the dietary needs of children whilst adhering to budget constraints.[41]

Additionally, some cooks rely on shopping outside of hours (e.g. over the weekend) to ensure the kitchen runs smoothly during the week.

Instead, **cooks, service leaders, and organisational staff should work together to decide on an appropriate allocation of time for menu planning**. This will look different for every service, but ideally the cook should have enough time and support to plan an appropriate menu which meets the recommended serves of the five food groups, whilst fitting budget constraints and allowing for special dietary requirements.

It is important not to underestimate the extent of tasks associated with menu planning, including budgeting, shopping, and completing necessary paperwork such as preparation for food safety audits, standard recipes, food allergen menu matrices that are essential to run a safe and effective kitchen.

"...regarding the amount of time in order to organise the menu and deliveries and all that – it is never enough... Each week in order to, you know, taking care of paperwork and all the things...Its very hard...So sometimes I do it on my day off, which is OK because you know, you can place the orders online, but yes, I would need like a couple of hours a week to do things really really properly."

–CENTRE COOK, REGIONAL SERVICE

"So yeah, I get 6 hours a week...I'm doing the three centres and if they need anything from town, that is my going to town day"

–CENTRE FOOD COORDINATOR, RURAL SERVICE



Food budget/costs

For some services, food budget is the main driver of menu quality, having sufficient funds is crucial to purchase enough food to meet recommendations across all five food groups.[7,43,44,46]

Service leaders can work with cooks to set, or advocate for, a food budget which allows the provision of enough food for all children, meeting the recommended dietary guidelines and providing the cook with flexibility to menu plan accordingly.

Food budget allocation

What factors impact the allocation of a food budget

Allocating a food budget based on the number of children attending ECEC each day can provide a framework to ensure each child has their nutritional needs met.

Data from Western Australia shows that the average cost ($) per child per day of a menu that provides the recommended amounts of all five food groups differs greatly for services in metropolitan versus very remote areas.[52]

Although lower food budgets have been seen in services that do not provide the recommended amounts of all five food groups, careful menu planning and budgeting can help to keep costs low whilst meeting dietary guidelines recommendations.[52]

What factors effect budget costs

The cost to purchase foods (including raw ingredients, packaged foods, etc) is closely linked with a number of factors shown in Table 11.

To keep costs down where possible, work with local suppliers to get the best value (see next page), focus on using seasonal produce, and consider building up a 'stable pantry'.

See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 5, page 70

See Vignette, page 62 of this module

Non-conventional food sources

In a survey completed in WA, researchers found that just over one in five long day care services surveyed (22.3%) used food from non-conventional food sources. Of these services, 51.3% indicated that they did not use this food to feed the children in their care but rather donated the food to families at the service.

The types of non-conventional food sources used were gardens at the service (25.0%), food pantries (13.9%), donations from families (13.9%), churches (5.6%), local producers (5.6%) and other sources (25.0%).[53]

TABLE 11: *Factors that affect budget costs*

Factor	Description	Effect on food costs in ECEC
Geographic location	Often, food has to travel further to reach areas outside of major cities.	The more travel that is involved, the greater the cost of that food is.
Availability	A poor growing season, a cancelled shipment, or other logistical problems can decrease the availability of foods. This is often worse for more remote areas which might rely on a single delivery.	When a food is less available in a certain town or region, that food is more expensive. Even small changes in availability of foods each week can change their prices, making exact budgeting difficult.
Seasonality	Different fruits, vegetables, and grains grow best during different parts of the year – meaning they are only available in some seasons.	Foods that are currently in season (different for each region) are often at their cheapest.
Weather events	Major weather events (e.g. cyclone, flooding) can impact the growth, delivery, or storage of foods making them less available.	If foods become less available due to impacts on the supply chain, they will become more expensive.
Cost of living	National level factors such as inflation can filter down to the price of foods.	During periods where cost of living is increasing, food costs often increase as well.
Food/ product selection	When shopping or ordering through a supplier, product choices can impact total cost.	Often, fresh fruit and vegetables are more expensive than frozen or canned options, and certain brand name products may be more expensive than generic alternatives.

How can ECEC service leaders support high-quality meal provision in their services?

ECEC service leaders can play a pivotal role in providing quality meals in their service. As a first approach, it is important for a service leader to believe in their capability to create change to the food environment in their service as a leader.

Foundational knowledge of leadership can create a working environment which encourages the prioritisation of menu quality. This includes effective communication between staff allowing for the transfer of knowledge and ideas, encouraging staff to try new methods of practice, and permitting routines to be changed when appropriate.[54] Additionally, positioning the quality of the menu as supportive of broader developmental goals (e.g. providing foods which support children to be energetic for the rest of the day) incorporates it into the service culture.[55]

Service leaders can provide a supportive environment and culture in the service, through approaches such as:[42,56]

Allocating time and budget

- Allocating time for menu planning during paid hours (including time to access menu planning tools, and time to gather, review, and action feedback).[46]
- Working with cooks to set, or advocate for, a food budget which allows the provision of enough food for all children, meeting the recommended dietary guidelines and providing the cook with flexibility to menu plan accordingly.

Supporting professional development

- Making a commitment to supporting continuous learning, through professional development opportunities during paid time.[57]
- This includes providing all staff with opportunities for professional development to support nutrition knowledge, menu planning, and safe food provision.[2,41] **This could be through formal training (in-person or online), or by signposting to available resources.**
  - For a service leader, professional development in nutrition and menu planning enables them to make informed decisions about menu quality and provide additional support to the cook responsible for planning menus.
- For cooks, completing the Food Safety Supervisor course can be an important element of professional development. This recognises a cook's importance in the provision of safe food at the service, and encourages them to take responsibility for safe food handling in the kitchen.
  - For larger services, provide opportunities for cooks to develop commercial food service skills that differ from home cooking, including yield-based recipe scaling and production scheduling.

Supporting involvement and collaboration

- Involving cooks, educators, children and families in menu planning discussions to ensure expectations are met.[41]
- Facilitating ongoing collaboration through open communication between the service leader, educators and cooks/chefs can:[57]
  - foster team cohesion. For example, at the start of each service, confirm attendance, dietary needs and any menu changes for the day with educators.
  - increase mutual understanding of staff roles and responsibilities.
  - allow cooks to vocalise challenges they face which other staff may not be aware of.
- Encouraging all staff members (especially cooks) to take pride in the responsibility they have to nourish and feed children.[57] Seek collaboration with external menu planning or nutrition education programs/organisations where possible to support staff capacity and skills.

Developing underpinning policies

- Developing and implementing a strong centre-based policy, through engagement with staff and families can ensure that the policy reflects the unique service.[58]
- Clearly communicating policy expectations with staff and families to ensure a whole-of-service approach.[58]

Working with suppliers

- Sourcing reliable and local (when possible) food suppliers to maximise consistency and time efficiency (e.g. pre-cut meats, food service product sizes, etc).[57]
- When changing suppliers (or when suppliers change brands used), check ingredient labels, particularly for allergens, and suitability for dietary needs.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA5, QA6, QA7

Reflective questions

- *Are there barriers, such as budget, staffing, time or access to resources, that may be impacting menu quality, and how are we addressing them?*
- *How do we know whether our menu truly reflects the diverse cultural backgrounds and dietary needs of the families attending our service?*
- *In what ways do we review and evaluate our menus to ensure they continue to support children's health, wellbeing and learning?*

SECTION 6

Menu Planning in Practice



Supporting menu planning, assessment and review in ECEC

Types of support

To assist cooks with menu planning a variety of support services, online tools and resources have been developed. Some evidence suggests that the use of these supports can improve menu quality.[2,41,44,49]

Seeking menu planning support can also assist with meeting Regulations 79 (Service providing food and beverages) and 80 (Weekly menu) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2012.



Individualised menu planning support

- A number of on-the-ground support services are available across each state and territory, delivered by dietitians, registered nutritionists, and health promotion officers.
- These services vary from being government-funded and freely available, to subscription or fee-based.
- Support provided varies from periodic menu reviews/assessments that include advice and recommendations (including understanding the number of food group serves being provided), advice and recommendations for specific issues, and training for cooks/chefs to build knowledge and confidence.



Online menu planning support

- Online tools are available whereby the person responsible for menu planning enters menu items/recipes into an online platform.
- Details such as the number of children being served are captured. The tool provides an overview of food groups provided, and compares this to the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* or local jurisdictional guidelines providing recommendations for menu improvement.



Online resources

- A variety of downloadable resources exist which aim to support menu planning.
- The information within these resources varies, but generally they provide information and recommendations on the amounts, varieties, and types of food and drinks that should be offered at ECEC.

⚠ **States and territories may set specific guidelines with accompanying documents. ECEC services should check what is available in their jurisdiction.**

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA6, QA7

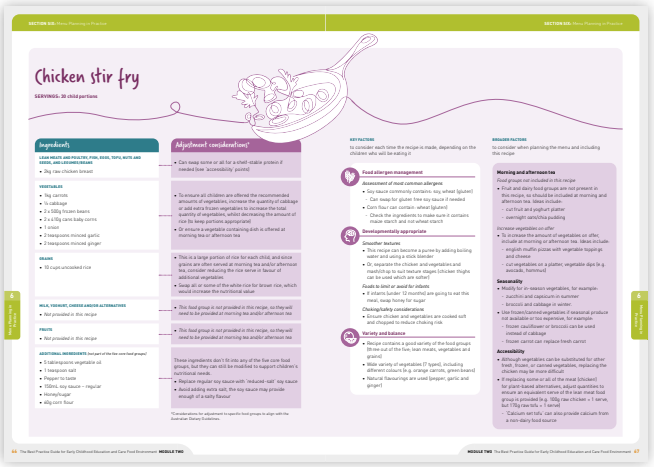
Improving your recipes

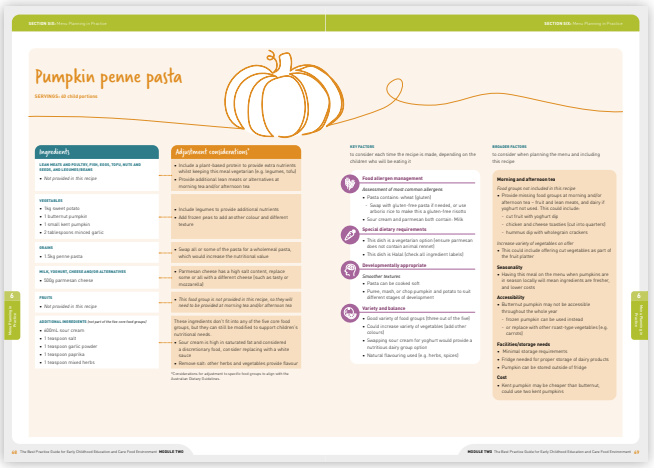
The 'Australian Dietary Guidelines' section provides details on the recommended number of serves children should be receiving from each food group whilst attending ECEC. To extend this into practice, the 'Improving your recipes' section below has been developed for cooks, by cooks, to support the menu planning process and help services meet the Australian Dietary Guideline recommendations by utilising the effective menu planning principles outlined above.

This section provides prompts for considering how to adapt the main meal (lunch) recipe to align with effective menu planning principles. This includes considering alignment with the Australian Dietary Guidelines, whilst reviewing if ingredients can/should be substituted based on special dietary requirements (e.g. food allergies, cultural requirements, etc), seasonal availability of produce, and budgetary concerns. Example recipe cards have also been provided to demonstrate this process in action with ECEC recipes.

These example recipe cards are not intended to be used as actual recipes, their purpose is to demonstrate how the principles of effective menu planning can be applied to an ECEC recipe.

It is recommended that after evaluating a recipe by utilising the 'Improving your recipes' section below, the final recipe is then inputted into a standardised recipe template.





NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA7

Standardised recipes

What is a standardised recipe?

A standardised recipe is a way of ensuring that **each time a recipe is made, the exact same ingredients and methods are used** – regardless of who is making the recipe or when. After developing a standardised recipe, ensure that this is followed precisely each and every time the recipe is made.

What elements make up a standardised recipe?

Generally, a standardised recipe includes the following elements:

- The recipe name
- The number of serves it makes (including the standard portion size and total yield)
- A list of ingredients (including brand, amount [quantity and unit])
  - For recipes made in bulk, different amounts can be listed for increasing number of portions
- Any common food allergens listed on the ingredient's packaging/information sheet, as well as any listed in the precautionary allergen ('may contain') labelling
- Detailed, step-by-step methods/procedure of how the recipe is made
- The number of serves provided in each food group (optional)
- Instructions for how the recipe is to be served (optional)
- Photos of the recipe at each step and as a final product (optional). Photos can be particularly helpful if specific textural requirements must be met.

A variety of downloadable standard recipe templates exist which aim to support menu planning. The elements within these templates vary, but generally they include the elements listed above. ECEC services should check what is available in their jurisdiction or nationally.

How standardised recipes support effective menu planning?

Utilising a standardised recipe is considered best practice in food service settings, as it **ensures consistency in nutritional contribution, food group balance, flavour, texture, portion size, ingredient sourcing, cost, and allergen content**, regardless of who is cooking or when. Therefore, standard recipes are a key tool for protecting both the nutritional quality and the safety of meals across staff changes, busy days, and ingredient substitutions.

After finalising the recipe

Impact of the main meal on morning and afternoon tea

By beginning the menu planning process with the main meal (lunch) recipe, services can then determine which other foods to provide in the daily menu (e.g. morning tea and afternoon tea) to ensure children's food group recommendations in ECEC are being met.

Acknowledging the logistical constraints often associated with the provision of breakfast and other foods over the course of the day, practical strategies and ideas have been provided which encourage services to consider options beyond what may be routine (e.g. cereal, crackers).

Recipe and menu review

Finally, regular review of the menu (including recipes used) is a critical aspect of making sure that the food provided is meeting the expectations of the ECEC community. *Section 7, Menu and meal feedback*, provides practical strategies for gathering feedback on the menu from children, educators, and families; and considering this feedback at the next menu planning cycle to demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement.

See Section 7, page 76

Reviewing and improving recipes

How can recipes be improved to meet children's nutritional needs?

By assessing recipes against the criteria listed below, small tweaks or major changes may become apparent which would help the recipe provide more serves of key food groups (e.g. lean meats, vegetables, etc), whilst also considering factors such as seasonality, cost, and variety.

To utilise this section, take a recipe from the standard menu, list the ingredients used (including quantities) and consider how each criterion (and related points) could be applied to your recipe.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA7

Why is this important?

Recipes that align with the Australian Dietary Guidelines directly impacts the nutritional quality of food children are provided whilst at ECEC. Providing enough variety and adequacy across the food groups ensures children receive key nutrients, crucial for their health and wellbeing. This also relates to Regulations 79 (Service providing food and beverages) and 80 (Weekly menu) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2012.

Table 12 expands upon the principles of effective menu planning outlined over page.

Key principles of effective menu planning

Effective menu planning in ECEC ensures the daily, weekly, and seasonal menu meets the nutritional needs of all children attending.

- Adherence to Australian Dietary Guidelines
- Food allergy and other special dietary requirements
- Developmental appropriateness
- Allocated hours for menu planning
- Cultural and demographic influences
- Food waste and sustainability factors
- Centre budget
- Variety and balance
- Periodic menu review

For effective menu planning to occur, the provision of quality meals should be a priority within the service culture, policies, and structure. For example, allocating sufficient paid hours each week to the staff member(s) responsible for menu planning, along with setting a food budget which allows for enough food (including quality and variety) to be purchased are crucial steps to prioritising menu planning in a service. *See Section 5, page 50*

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA6, QA7

TABLE 12: *General points to consider*

Australian Dietary Guideline Adherence	**Assessment** • Full menu compliance with guidelines is assessed across all food served throughout the day or week, rather than by individual recipes alone. However, checking if a recipe meets the recommended amounts from each food group provides an opportunity to understand which food groups may be missing, or may need to be provided more elsewhere. • Attendance patterns can be used to ensure daily serve targets remain achievable across the occasions offered. • Checking recipes against the Australian Dietary Guidelines can help to identify any discretionary foods or ingredients on the menu, and whether they can be reduced or swapped for a different option. **Portions/serve sizes** • Portions must consider the dietary needs for different age groups – generally, older children will require larger portions. Using standard sized serving equipment (e.g. scoop, ladle) ensures all portions are the same size and that every child will have enough, allowing extra to then be served for children that need it (e.g. older children or those that are still feeling hungry). **Food group guidance** • If using meat in a recipe, choose lean meats when possible. • If swapping meat for plant-based alternatives (e.g. tofu, legumes, etc.), ensure there is enough alternative in each portion to allow a similar 'serve' of the food group. For example, half a serve of raw red meat is 50g, whereas half a serve of canned legumes is 75g, or 85g for tofu. More of the alternative is needed to create a similar 'half serve'. • Replace 'white' grains (e.g. white bread, white rice, white flour, regular pasta) with brown or wholemeal options. Even replacing a portion of the grain with a wholegrain version can improve nutritional quality.
Variety and balance	• Including a variety of food groups in a recipe ensures a balanced nutritional profile. Variety within a food group (e.g. multiple colours of vegetables) is also important. • If possible, update the menu so that meals aren't repeated on the same day of each week (for example, rather than serving fish every Tuesday, change which day fish is served each time). This ensures children who attend part-time still receive a variety of options. • Rice is a cost-effective grain but keep to the recommended portion as too many grain serves can displace vegetables and may reduce dietary variety. If reducing the amount of rice in a recipe, use any cost saving to increase vegetable content instead, such as adding frozen peas, canned corn, or seasonal cabbage. • Check salt (sodium) content of flavourings, sauces, stock, canned goods, etc. as these are common high-salt foods, swap for 'low-salt' options. • Cooking methods can impact the nutritional quality of meals – for example avoid deep frying.
Food allergies	• When substituting ingredients due to surrounding considerations (e.g. guideline adherence, seasonality, etc), be aware of additional allergens introduced and update your food allergen menu matrix. *See Section 8, page 80* • Clearly list and identify all allergens present in ingredients when completing a standard recipe template (after utilising this section).
Developmentally appropriate	**Texture** • Check for foods that should be modified (e.g., texture) before they are given to infants and younger children. • Select softer meat cuts for younger children (for example chicken thighs rather than breast). **Choking risk** • Ensure foods are prepared in a way that minimises risk of choking (e.g. carrots cooked or grated and grapes chopped lengthwise for infants and toddlers). *See Section 4, page 45* **Foods to avoid for infants** • Choose ingredients with all children in mind (e.g. do not include honey if infants under 12 months will be eating). *See Section 4, page 46*

Planning morning tea and afternoon tea around this main meal	• Identify which food groups are not meeting recommendations (e.g. not included in the recipe, or included but not fully meeting recommendations) from the main meal (i.e. lunch) and use the morning and afternoon tea occasions strategically to fill this gap. For example, if the recipe contains half the requirements of vegetables per child per day, another half serve of vegetables will be required during morning tea or afternoon tea.
Special dietary requirements *What are the considerations with respect to dietary requirements (cultural, vegetarian, vegan, medical)*	**Cultural** • Ensure that ingredients are suitable for cultural or religious dietary requirements – confirm these with the families. • Choose dishes that cater to a variety of cultural food traditions and flavour profiles. **Vegetarian/vegan** • Meat dishes can often be adapted by replacing the animal protein with firm tofu or legumes (e.g. chickpeas or lentils). Adjust quantities to ensure an equivalent serve is provided *See Section 2, page 22* *See Section 6, page 68* • Ensure that any sauces / flavourings used in the recipe are vegan-friendly by checking the label.
Facilities, equipment and storage needs	• Consider storage facilities (e.g., freezer/fridge space or availability) and adjust recipes accordingly.
Seasonality	• Modify recipes to include seasonal fruits and vegetables. • Frozen or canned vegetables can be used instead of fresh produce when seasonal ingredients are unavailable or too expensive.
Accessibility	• Avoid keeping large stockpiles unless reliable storage is available. • Schedule vegetarian menu days to align with times when meat deliveries are unavailable. *See Vignette, page 62 of this module*
Cost (budget driven adaptations)	• Some protein-rich food sources can be more expensive, such as chicken breast. Partially replacing the animal protein element with legumes (e.g. chickpeas, lentils) can reduce cost while maintaining protein content and increasing vegetable serves. • Frozen or canned vegetables are cost-effective, nutritious alternatives to fresh produce, making them a reliable option when fresh produce is unavailable or costly. • Compare the cost of buying fresh vegetables whole (cheaper than pre-cut) against the cost of time needed to cut them.

VIGNETTE

Menu planning in a very remote Western Australian mining community

SERVICE	One Tree Wickham Children's Service
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, not-for-profit
AGE RANGE	Birth to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	46
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Remote

LOCATION

Wickham, WA



The cook in this remote long day care service is responsible for all cooking and food preparation for children, menu planning, online food ordering, picking up grocery orders and managing food allergens, amongst other things.

Being in a very remote town, resources at the local grocery store are often limited. Substitutions, or doing without, are a common part of the food ordering and menu planning process. The cook has found that by keeping staples in the pantry, such as tinned legumes and vegetables, pasta, rice and noodles, and frozen fruit and vegetables, she is able to maintain enough food to prepare balanced meals for around one week in the case of delayed produce at the supermarket, or if any ingredients are unavailable.

When menu planning, the cook takes into account the availability of foods at the supermarket. Although she works off a summer and winter rotating four-week menu, she needs to remain flexible as sometimes the ingredients she needs for a recipe cannot be purchased. She tries to plan meals based around what is in stock, to avoid having to make extra substitutions. To achieve this, she uses recipes in which substitutions are easy, e.g. substituting legumes for meat when there is no meat available.

She also takes food allergies into account and aims to have recipes that are easily adjustable depending on which children are attending the service that day, and their food allergies. In this way, it looks like all of the children are eating the same foods, and the children with food allergies don't feel left out or different.

What to include in a stable pantry

This pantry would feed around 30 children morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea for approximately one week (5–10 meals) in the event that other food was not readily available. It can be scaled up or down according to the number of children and staff at your service, can be stored in the pantry without the need for refrigeration, and can be combined in many ways to make different meals.

Stable pantry:

- 14kg flour (different varieties to accommodate food allergies and intolerances)
- 8kg pasta
- 10kg rice
- 5kg noodles (different types to accommodate food allergies and intolerances)
- 8 tins of diced tomatoes
- 5 each tins vegetables (peas, corn, etc.)
- 15 tins of legumes (different varieties)
- 8 tins tuna
- 2 packets each of various spices
- 2–3 litres of oil (e.g. vegetable oil, olive oil)
- 2 packets of various types of dried fruit (sultanas, apricots, dates)
- 20 cartons of long-life milk (different varieties to accommodate food allergies and intolerances)
- 5–10 packets of wholegrain crackers

Add these foods if there is access to a freezer:

- Frozen vegetables – 3 packets of each type (e.g. mixed veg, cauliflower, broccoli, spinach)
- Frozen fruit – 2 packets of each type
- Frozen bread – 4 loaves of each type (e.g. wholemeal, fruit toast, wholemeal English muffins)
- Frozen meats – 2–4 kg each (chicken, mince)
- Frozen, pre-cooked legumes – 3 packs

Effective menu planning principles in practice

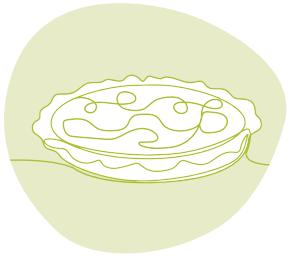
Recipe cards examples



Chicken stir fry



Pumpkin penne pasta



Shepherd's pie

Chicken stir fry

SERVINGS: 30 child portions



Ingredients

LEAN MEATS AND POULTRY, FISH, EGGS, TOFU, NUTS AND SEEDS, AND LEGUMES/BEANS

- 2kg raw chicken breast

VEGETABLES

- 1kg carrots
- ½ cabbage
- 2 x 500g frozen beans
- 2 x 410g cans baby corns
- 1 onion
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 2 teaspoons minced ginger

GRAINS

- 10 cups uncooked rice

MILK, YOGHURT, CHEESE AND/OR ALTERNATIVES

- *Not provided in this recipe*

FRUITS

- *Not provided in this recipe*

ADDITIONAL INGREDIENTS *(not part of the five core food groups)*

- 5 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Pepper to taste
- 150mL soy sauce – regular
- Honey/sugar
- 60g corn flour

Adjustment considerations*

- Can swap some or all for a shelf-stable protein if needed (see 'accessibility' points)

- To ensure all children are offered the recommended amounts of vegetables, increase the quantity of cabbage or add extra frozen vegetables to increase the total quantity of vegetables, whilst decreasing the amount of rice (to keep portions appropriate)
- Or ensure a vegetable containing dish is offered at morning tea or afternoon tea

- This is a large portion of rice for each child, and since grains are often served at morning tea and/or afternoon tea, consider reducing the rice serve in favour of additional vegetables
- Swap all or some of the white rice for brown rice, which would increase the nutritional value

- *This food group is not provided in this recipe, so they will need to be provided at morning tea and/or afternoon tea*

- *This food group is not provided in this recipe, so they will need to be provided at morning tea and/or afternoon tea*

These ingredients don't fit into any of the five core food groups, but they can still be modified to support children's nutritional needs.

- Replace regular soy sauce with 'reduced-salt' soy sauce
- Avoid adding extra salt, the soy sauce may provide enough of a salty flavour

*Considerations for adjustment to specific food groups to align with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

KEY FACTORS

to consider each time the recipe is made, depending on the children who will be eating it

Food allergen management

Assessment of most common allergens

- Soy sauce commonly contains: soy, wheat (gluten)
  - Can swap for gluten free soy sauce if needed
- Corn flour can contain: wheat (gluten)
  - Check the ingredients to make sure it contains maize starch and not wheat starch

Developmentally appropriate

Smoother textures

- This recipe can become a puree by adding boiling water and using a stick blender
- Or, separate the chicken and vegetables and mash/chop to suit texture stages (chicken thighs can be used which are softer)

Foods to limit or avoid for infants

- If infants (under 12 months) are going to eat this meal, swap honey for sugar

Choking/safety considerations

- Ensure chicken and vegetables are cooked soft and chopped to reduce choking risk

Variety and balance

- Recipe contains a good variety of the food groups (three out of the five; lean meats, vegetables and grains)
- Wide variety of vegetables (7 types), including different colours (e.g. orange carrots, green beans)
- Natural flavourings are used (pepper, garlic and ginger)

BROADER FACTORS

to consider when planning the menu and including this recipe

Morning and afternoon tea

Food groups not included in this recipe

- Fruit and dairy food groups are not present in this recipe, so should be included at morning and afternoon tea. Ideas include:
  - cut fruit and yoghurt platter
  - overnight oats/chia pudding

Increase vegetables on offer

- To increase the amount of vegetables on offer, include at morning or afternoon tea. Ideas include:
  - english muffin pizzas with vegetable toppings and cheese
  - cut vegetables on a platter, vegetable dips (e.g. avocado, hommus)

Seasonality

- Modify for in-season vegetables, for example:
  - zucchini and capsicum in summer
  - broccoli and cabbage in winter.
- Use frozen/canned vegetables if seasonal produce not available or too expensive, for example:
  - frozen cauliflower or broccoli can be used instead of cabbage
  - frozen carrot can replace fresh carrot

Accessibility

- Although vegetables can be substituted for other fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables, replacing the chicken may be more difficult
- If replacing some or all of the meat (chicken) for plant-based alternatives, adjust quantities to ensure an equivalent serve of the lean meat food group is provided (e.g. 100g raw chicken = 1 serve, but 170g raw tofu = 1 serve)
  - 'Calcium set tofu' can also provide calcium from a non-dairy food source

Pumpkin penne pasta

SERVINGS: 40 child portions



Ingredients

LEAN MEATS AND POULTRY, FISH, EGGS, TOFU, NUTS AND SEEDS, AND LEGUMES/BEANS

- *Not provided in this recipe*

VEGETABLES

- 1kg sweet potato
- 1 butternut pumpkin
- 1 small kent pumpkin
- 2 tablespoons minced garlic

GRAINS

- 1.5kg penne pasta

MILK, YOGHURT, CHEESE AND/OR ALTERNATIVES

- 500g parmesan cheese

FRUITS

- *Not provided in this recipe*

ADDITIONAL INGREDIENTS *(not part of the five core food groups)*

- 600mL sour cream
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon mixed herbs

Adjustment considerations*

- Include a plant-based protein to provide extra nutrients whilst keeping this meal vegetarian (e.g. legumes, tofu)
- Provide additional lean meats or alternatives at morning tea and/or afternoon tea

- Include legumes to provide additional nutrients
- Add frozen peas to add another colour and different texture

- Swap all or some of the pasta for a wholemeal pasta, which would increase the nutritional value

- Parmesan cheese has a high salt content, replace some or all with a different cheese (such as tasty or mozzarella)

- *This food group is not provided in this recipe, so they will need to be provided at morning tea and/or afternoon tea*

These ingredients don't fit into any of the five core food groups, but they can still be modified to support children's nutritional needs.

- Sour cream is high in saturated fat and considered a discretionary food, consider replacing with a white sauce
- Remove salt: other herbs and vegetables provide flavour

*Considerations for adjustment to specific food groups to align with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

KEY FACTORS

to consider each time the recipe is made, depending on the children who will be eating it

Food allergen management

Assessment of most common allergens

- Pasta contains: wheat (gluten)
  - Swap with gluten-free pasta if needed, or use arborio rice to make this a gluten-free risotto
- Sour cream and parmesan both contain: Milk

Special dietary requirements

- This dish is a vegetarian option (ensure parmesan does not contain animal rennet)
- This dish is Halal (check all ingredient labels)

Developmentally appropriate

Smoother textures

- Pasta can be cooked soft
- Puree, mash, or chop pumpkin and potato to suit different stages of development

Variety and balance

- Good variety of food groups (three out of the five)
- Could increase variety of vegetables (add other colours)
- Swapping sour cream for yoghurt would provide a nutritious dairy group option
- Natural flavouring used (e.g. herbs, spices)

BROADER FACTORS

to consider when planning the menu and including this recipe

Morning and afternoon tea

Food groups not included in this recipe

- Provide missing food groups at morning and/or afternoon tea – fruit and lean meats, and dairy if yoghurt not used. This could include:
  - cut fruit with yoghurt dip
  - chicken and cheese toasties (cut into quarters)
  - hummus dip with wholegrain crackers

Increase variety of vegetables on offer

- This could include offering cut vegetables as part of the fruit platter

Seasonality

- Having this meal on the menu when pumpkins are in season locally will mean ingredients are fresher, and lower costs

Accessibility

- Butternut pumpkin may not be accessible throughout the whole year
  - frozen pumpkin can be used instead
  - or replace with other roast-type vegetables (e.g. carrots)

Facilities/storage needs

- Minimal storage requirements
- Fridge needed for proper storage of dairy products
- Pumpkin can be stored outside of fridge

Cost

- Kent pumpkin may be cheaper than butternut, could use two kent pumpkins

Shepherd's pie



SERVINGS: 30 child portions

Ingredients

LEAN MEATS AND POULTRY, FISH, EGGS, TOFU, NUTS AND SEEDS, AND LEGUMES/BEANS

- 6kg beef mince

VEGETABLES

- 2 ½kg frozen mixed vegetables (peas, corn and carrots)
- 1 large onion
- 3 tablespoons minced garlic
- 3 Celery stalks
- 4kg potatoes
- 1 cup tomato paste – no added salt

GRAINS

- *Not provided in this recipe*

MILK, YOGHURT, CHEESE AND/OR ALTERNATIVES

- 3 cups milk
- 2 ½ cups grated cheddar cheese

FRUITS

- *Not provided in this recipe*

ADDITIONAL INGREDIENTS *(not part of the five core food groups)*

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 250g butter
- 2 tablespoons dried mixed herbs
- 4 cups beef stock
- ½ cup Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons salt
- Pepper to taste

Adjustment considerations*

- Ensure lean beef mince is used
- This is a large amount of meat for 30 children (200g raw per child), consider swapping half (e.g. 3kg) for additional vegetables or legumes (see 'accessibility' points)

- Ensure 'no added salt' tomato paste is used

- *This food group is not provided in this recipe, so they will need to be provided at morning tea and/or afternoon tea*

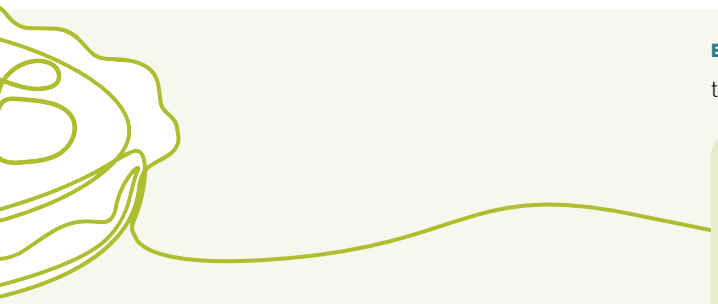
- This is only a small amount of dairy for each child, ensure a dairy-containing dish is also offered at morning tea and/or afternoon tea

- *This food group is not provided in this recipe, so they will need to be provided at morning tea and/or afternoon tea*

These ingredients don't fit into any of the five core food groups, but they can still be modified to support children's nutritional needs.

- Substitute butter with poly- or mono-unsaturated margarine and/or milk for the mashed potato mixture
- Purchase a reduced-salt beef stock if available
- Remove salt: other herbs, stock and sauce should provide enough flavour

*Considerations for adjustment to specific food groups to align with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.



KEY FACTORS

to consider each time the recipe is made, depending on the children who will be eating it

Food allergen management

- Milk, cheese, and butter contain: milk
  - Could use a dairy-free milk and cheese, and remove butter to meet cow's milk allergy
- Worcestershire sauce can contain: wheat, fish (anchovy)
  - Could swap for a gluten-free product or one that does not contain fish
- Beef stock can contain: wheat (gluten) and soy

Special dietary requirements

- To create a vegetarian option:
  - Replace beef with legumes (e.g. lentils)
  - Swap beef stock for vegetable stock
  - Ensure Worcestershire sauce does not contain fish
- Replace beef with lentils to create a vegetarian variety

Developmentally appropriate

- Mashed potatoes ready to be served to infants
- The full dish can be made into a puree if required
- By combining many different vegetables into one dish, this increases children's exposure to new foods they may be unfamiliar with

Variety and balance

- Good variety of food groups (three out of the five)
- Great variety of vegetables, including multiple different colours

BROADER FACTORS

to consider when planning the menu and including this recipe

Morning and afternoon tea

Food groups not included in this recipe

- Provide missing food groups at morning and/or afternoon tea – fruit and grains. This could include:
  - toast with avocado or hummus topping
  - fruit platter with whole grain crackers
  - blueberry pikelets
- To increase the amount of dairy on offer, provide at morning tea and/or afternoon tea. This could include:
  - fruit smoothie
  - cheese and fruit platter

Seasonality

- Potatoes and frozen vegetables usually available year-round. If unavailable, can change to sweet potatoes or pumpkin

Accessibility

- Potatoes can be kept at room temperature (don't take up space in the fridge)
- Frozen vegetables are interchangeable depending on what is available
- If beef mince is unavailable, could replace some or all of it for plant-based alternatives. Adjust quantities to ensure an equivalent serve of the lean meat food group is provided (e.g. 100g raw mince = 1 serve, but 150g drained canned lentils = 1 serve). For example, 2kg beef mince in this recipe could be replaced with:
  - 3kg canned chickpeas (drained and rinsed) – approximately 12-13 400g cans
  - 3kg canned lentils (drained and rinsed) – approximately 12-13 400g cans

  These options stretch the mince further, and children may enjoy them when mixed into a wet dish such as Shepherd's Pie. Legumes count towards the amount of both vegetables food group and lean meats food group, and represent good value for money

Facilities/storage needs

- Can be made ahead of time and stored in the freezer (additional freezer space needed)
- Freezer space also needed for frozen mixed vegetables
- 4kg of potatoes can be held at room temperature and do not take up fridge space

Cost

- Using lean beef mince increases cost (but still cheaper than other cuts of meat)
- Can reduce cost of meat by reducing the quantity of beef used and adding lentils
- Potatoes and frozen vegetables are cost effective vegetable options

Breakfast, morning and afternoon tea and other food opportunities

Breakfast

What impacts breakfast service in ECEC settings

The provision of breakfast varies across services, depending on the context of the service (e.g. later opening hours may result in no breakfast service). Often, breakfast is an optional meal, not provided to all children. Further, the cut-off times (e.g. when breakfast service ends) is determined by each service, and may impact which children are able to access this meal opportunity.

Planning for breakfast

Various factors should be considered[59] when planning a breakfast service, including:

Roles and responsibilities	• Consider breakfast preparation in the context of the cook's work hours (e.g. is the cook at work and able to assist with breakfast preparation or service?). • If cooks aren't available, educators must take responsibility for breakfast service as part of their role. Services will need to accommodate for this by scheduling sufficient staff at these times.
Daily activity levels	• Acknowledging the activities the child has on for the day that may impact mealtimes.
Mealtimes schedules	• Take into account morning period can involve morning tea and other food opportunities – needs to be looked at holistically for the child and service. • Timing (e.g. is it a progressive mealtime model?) *See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 7, page 56* • How are breakfasts included in food policy at the service?
Nutrition guidelines	• Taking into account the contribution that breakfast will bring to daily nutritional requirements and aligning breakfast provision with nutrition guidelines.
Food budget	• Ensure that the budget allows for nutritious breakfast options.
Food insecurity	• Providing breakfast can be a safety net for children who may be experiencing food insecurity issues at home. • Although not all services provide breakfast to all children, having some options available to those who need it is important.
Communication with families	As breakfast is less structured than other mealtimes in ECEC (e.g. not all children receive breakfast, options may be limited), communication with families is critical to: • Understand whether or not a child has been fed before they arrive at ECEC. • Determine if breakfast is regularly required. • Ensure services can accommodate ad hoc family emergencies. • Assist families to understand if enough food is being packed each day (in lunchbox-based services). • Determine if breakfast will be brought from home for consumption upon arriving at the service.

Breakfast and responsive feeding

Although the flow and structure of breakfast may be different to other mealtimes, responsive feeding practices should still remain consistent and deliberate:

- Offer breakfast for all children who arrive during the breakfast service window, allowing children to decide if they are hungry and would like to eat.
- Create a space where children can sit and eat relatively calmly where possible.
- Ensure children are seated and supervised whilst eating and drinking to reduce the risk of choking.

See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 2, page 21

Allow self-serving of breakfast options, to support self-regulation, or provide smaller portions at first and allow 'seconds' for those that wish to have more.

⚠ For children with food allergies, follow individualised allergy care plans, ensure they are given the right food that is safe for them to eat. Two staff members should check and sign off that the right food is given to the right child with food allergy.

⚠ For high-risk foods (e.g. milk, yoghurt), minimise the amount of time they spend at room temperature.

If a child is hungry before or after the set breakfast time, ensure nourishing options are available to them.

Breakfast foods

Even while kept simple, breakfast is an opportunity to provide a variety of tasty options across the five food groups. When planning which options will be available, consideration should be given to:

- As a minimal breakfast that provides nutritional quality, offer wholegrain-based cereals (e.g. wheat biscuits, oats) with dairy (e.g. milk, yoghurt, or alternatives).
  - If possible, cereals should be high-fibre, minimally processed, and iron fortified.
  - If choosing packaged cereals, look for options that are low in added sugars (less than 15g of sugar per 100g if it does not contain dried fruit; less than 25g sugar per 100g if dried fruit is an ingredient in the cereal).[40]
  - Providing a side of fruit will create a more balanced meal.
- Pre-planning allows for quick and easy breakfast options which don't require cooking in the morning, beyond simple cereals (e.g. vegetable frittata, overnight oats, savoury breakfast muffins, etc). This allows for acknowledgement and support for offering breakfast options aligned with cultural preferences.

Breakfast ideas

Wholegrain or wholemeal toast with spread or topping: Nutrient dense spreads (e.g. ricotta, avocado, roasted pumpkin) or toppings (e.g. cheese on toast, baked beans on toast)

Cereals with dairy (and fruit):

- Wheat biscuits (e.g. Weet-bix™)
- Oats/porridge (with fresh or frozen fruit)
- Overnight oats (with fruit and yoghurt)
- Muesli

Other:

- Pre-made savoury muffins
- Cold, hard boiled eggs
- Vegetable frittata

Is breakfast part of menu and meal assessment?

As breakfast provision is optional and often less structured, it is generally not assessed in the same way as other mealtimes. However, when it is offered, it is an important contribution to a child's daily intake and energy levels at the start of the day. If providing breakfast, consideration should be given to:

- Clearly define who is responsible for preparation and service.
- Appropriate portion sizes, as breakfast is a full meal.
- Document what is available on the menu if it is a regular offering.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA4, QA6, QA7

Morning tea and afternoon tea

Menu planning

Morning tea and afternoon tea are both important opportunities to create a balanced daily menu in conjunction with lunch (main meal) which meets the recommended number of serves from each food group for all children. Considerations when planning include:

- Think of this as a mini-mealtime (meaning a variety of options and food groups can be offered).
- Morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea combine to form a standard menu which is assessed against the Australian Dietary Guidelines, so it is important to consider it:
  - in relation to the main lunch meal.
  - in terms of meeting and balancing 5 foods groups across the day.

Morning and afternoon tea timing

- Services can decide what mealtime approach works best for their context .
  - For many services, Morning Tea starts at around 9am, with Afternoon Tea provided at 2pm-3pm.
  - If following a progressive approach, these options may be available for up to an hour, with children free to choose if, and how much, they would like to eat.

See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 7, page 56

Morning and afternoon tea foods

Morning and afternoon tea are a great opportunity to provide children with foods and food groups which may not appear elsewhere on the menu that day.

Some key considerations:

- Include a vegetable option in at least morning or afternoon tea, such as:
  - Fruit and vegetable platter (only offer a platter if all foods on the platter are suitable for any children with food allergies).
  - Legume based dips (e.g. hummus, white bean dip).
  - Vegetable based fritters.
- Offer ½ cup milk at morning or afternoon tea, not at both.
- When providing sweet options, select low sugar foods, such as fruit-based muffins, unflavoured yoghurt with fresh fruit pieces.
- When providing savoury options, select lower fat and lower salt foods, such as vegetable and herb muffins instead of pastry based pinwheels or sausage rolls.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA7

Other food opportunities

When other food is needed

This guide uses the term "other food opportunities" instead of "snacks". The usual scheduled mealtimes are morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea, and these are the meals assessed as part of the menu.

The word "snacks" can suggest a focus on packaged foods. The term "other food opportunities" is used to emphasise that these are food opportunities outside the usual routine mealtimes.

There are a variety of reasons other food may be needed, including:

- Children who may still be hungry before or after the scheduled mealtimes (e.g. breakfast, morning tea, lunch, or afternoon tea).
- Toddlers undertaking the transition from infants rooms to toddler rooms (e.g. away from being fed on demand towards structured mealtimes), who will often be hungry at a time that does not match the room's timetable.
- Children who are being picked up late and require additional food before leaving.
  - This can support families' evening routines by preventing the child from being hungry immediately upon leaving ECEC.

⚠ For children with food allergies, follow the set policies and procedures for providing foods for food allergy. All food and drinks for children with food allergy must be labelled with the child's name and their allergy. Two staff members should check and sign off that the right food is given to the right child with food allergy.

Although generally quick and simple in nature, when planned effectively other food opportunities can be an important contributor to a child's energy levels and overall dietary intake.

Part of a child's overall daily intake

- Other food can support children in meeting their recommended number of serves from the five food groups.
  - However, other food opportunities are generally not assessed as part of the broader menu as not all children will be offered them in a structured way.
- Cooks should be allocated time to plan and prepare other food opportunities, similar to the rest of the menu.

Reducing workload in the kitchen and on the floor

- Make use of leftovers from morning and afternoon tea (e.g. fruit, vegetable platters, baked goods, etc) or lunch options which could be served cold (e.g. meatballs, frittata).
- Leftovers can be saved in the fridge for each room, to be offered again later in the same day. However, to minimise food safety risks, they should not be kept for the next day.
- Other food opportunities generally need to be low effort and ready-to-go for the educators serving them.
- If planned ahead, a 'cook once, eat twice' principal can be used, for example:
  - If making vegetable slice for lunch, cook an additional tray and freeze until needed at a future time.

Meeting nutritional gaps

- Include calcium-rich foods such as dairy (e.g. unflavoured plain yoghurt, cheese).
- Include vegetables and meat and meat alternatives to complement the daily menu.

Food suggestions

Crackers, preferably wholegrain varieties

- Plain, unflavoured rice crackers can be used for a gluten free option
- Pita crisps can be made in place of crackers
- Cheese and cracker platter

Rice cakes or corn thins

- Rice cake with cream cheese or hummus

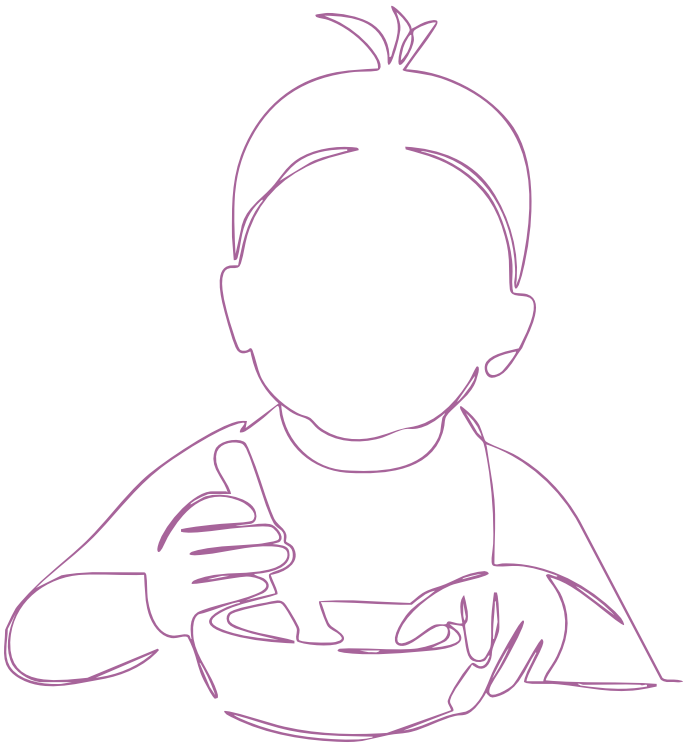
Dairy and fruit

- Homemade frozen yoghurt (blend fruits into yoghurt, then freeze)
- Fruit and yoghurt cup
- Fresh, cut fruit pieces

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA2, QA3, QA7

Reflective questions

- *How well do we support cooks and food coordinators to undertake the complex responsibilities associated with menu planning, budgeting, food allergen management and food safety?*
- *How do we use mealtimes to support children who may experience food insecurity, varying attendance patterns, developmental transitions, or additional nutritional needs?*
- *When adapting recipes due to budget, seasonal availability, supply chain interruptions, cultural requirements or dietary needs, how do we ensure nutritional quality and food group balance are maintained?*



SECTION 7

Menu and Meal Feedback



Menu and meal feedback

Feedback on the menu (including specific recipes and menu options) is crucial. By gathering and utilising feedback from children, educators, and families, cooks are able to adapt the menu to support children's participation at mealtimes (impacting their mealtime behaviour), whilst minimising food waste.

The physical (e.g. position of the kitchen in relation to mealtime space) and social (e.g. how often children talk directly to the cook) environment within an ECEC can impact the types of feedback a cook receives, so structured feedback opportunities should be embedded into service culture to avoid valuable feedback being missed.

Children

It is crucial that children are provided with the opportunity to give feedback on the menu, not only because they are the ones eating the food served, but also to ensure their autonomy is respected and to build a sense of being a valued member of the community.

Type of feedback	Mechanisms
Feedback on meals had *Children provide feedback on specific foods eaten and how the foods made them feel*	**Requested feedback** • Thumbs up to show if it was enjoyed. • Include narrative responses from educators – e.g. written on the whiteboard. **Observed feedback** • Educators note which dishes children returned to for more servings, as an indicator of what was popular. • Communication to the cook, letting them know when they like the food. • Amount of plate waste can be an indicator of what is eaten vs not (e.g. lots of tuna being left on plates from tuna pasta might mean the recipe needs adjusting). • However, leftover food does not necessarily mean it was not enjoyed, as the child may have served more than they required. • Overall daily food waste (e.g. if all dumped in compost bin) indicates how much food was not eaten.
Feedback on meals they would like *Providing feedback on what they would like*	• 'Mat time' (when the educator and children sit together) provides an opportunity for input on the kinds of foods they would like to try. • Support mealtime discussions on different foods children like to eat at home. • Taste testing potential new recipes before they are added to the menu (e.g. the cook prepares a small batch of a new vegetable soup and offers tastes at morning tea, noting which children return for more). • Children choose between two pre-planned nutritious meal options for the upcoming menu cycle. • Picture-based preference cards indicating options or foods or dishes which children can vote on based on what they would like to see on the menu.
Initial input *In some services children are part of the planning process*	• Engage children in learning activities that explores different meals through pictures of meals. Or, for example, exploring different coloured fruits and vegetables that could be included on a platter – making pretend platters. • Children nominate a favourite ingredient for the cook to incorporate into an upcoming meal.
Input on involvement *Feedback on how they would like to be involved in the process*	• Children indicate whether they would like to be involved in choosing meals (e.g. at the start of a new menu cycle, an educator asks the group whether they would like to help pick what is on the menu that week). • Children indicate their preferred way of giving menu feedback (e.g. some children prefer tasting new foods to give feedback, others prefer pointing to picture cards; educators note individual preferences and structure feedback opportunities accordingly). • Children indicate whether they would like to see a food regularly used at home included on the menu (e.g. a child shares a food from their cultural background, and the educator asks the group if they would like the cook to try including it in an upcoming meal).

Educators

By being present during mealtimes, educators will observe and hear direct and indirect feedback from children – which the cooks are often not able to notice on their own. Therefore, passing this feedback on to cooks is essential.

Type of feedback	Mechanisms
Feedback from children on meals had *Educators can provide more contextualised feedback to cooks, such as certain parts of a meal that received specific comments, rather than just an overall indication of liking or disliking*	• Talking with the cook directly (e.g. a brief end-of-mealtime conversation where the educator shares what children responded well to and any observations that might help the cook with upcoming menu planning). • Feedback book (e.g. a shared notebook in the kitchen where educators record positive mealtime observations and children's responses after each mealtime, for the cook to draw on when planning the next menu cycle).

Families

Communicating with families about the menu and recipes being used ensures their voices are heard and knowledge of their child's needs and preferences are understood. In smaller communities (e.g. remote towns) this may be easier due to familiarity within the community, but it is important regardless of geographic location.

Type of feedback	Mechanisms
Feedback from children on meals had *Families' feedback on what the children have favoured/how they eat at home in after care to cooks and educators*	**Informal** • Families as First Teachers (FaFT) require family members to stay in the space while the children are there. This time can be used to talk about the menu (e.g. while a family member is present during the session, an educator points out the week's menu displayed on the wall and invites the family member to share any feedback or foods their child favours at home). • During drop-off or pick-up, an educator invites families to share any meal ideas or ingredients they would like to see featured on the upcoming menu. • A menu suggestion box is available at the service entrance where families can leave written ideas for the cook to review during menu planning. **Formal** • Communication apps or websites used with families (e.g. the weekly menu is posted through the service's digital platform with a simple prompt inviting families to share any feedback or suggestions for the cook to consider at the next menu planning cycle). • A short survey sent to families at the start of each menu cycle asking if there are any meals, ingredients, or cultural foods they would like the cook to consider including.
Feedback on child needs in relation to meals • ***Special Dietary Requirements*** *Must be considered when the child is attending (e.g. food allergies, intolerances, or preferences)* • ***Cultural Requirements*** *Different requirements across cultures and between individuals in the same culture, specific feedback needed to ensure recipes meet the need (e.g. Halal, kosher, or pescatarian)* • ***Illness*** *Children who are unwell may have specific requirements*	
Menu • *Invite families to provide feedback and/or offer recipes for consideration in menus when menus receive periodic reviews* • *General family preferences (e.g. providing carbohydrate options other than rice or pasta to increase variation)* • *Families suggest meals or ingredients that reflect their child's preferences or cultural background for the cook to consider when planning upcoming menus* • *Families provide feedback on meals their child has talked about or requested at home following a mealtime at the service*	

Closing the feedback loop

Collecting feedback is only valuable if it is acted on and communicated back to those who provided it. When children, educators, and families can see that their input has made a difference to the menu, they are more likely to continue engaging with the feedback process.

Embedding a structured feedback loop into service culture also supports continuous improvement of the food environment, consistent with Quality Area 2 of the National Quality Standard (NQS), which requires services to actively promote healthy eating and embed it as part of ongoing quality improvement planning.

To close the feedback loop:

- Feedback from all sources should be recorded in a consistent way (e.g. a shared feedback book or digital log that the cook can access during menu planning).
- The cook reviews recorded feedback at each menu planning cycle and considers what changes, if any, are appropriate to make.
- Where feedback has informed a change to the menu, this is communicated back to the relevant person, e.g. an educator lets a child know their suggested vegetable is on the menu this week, or a family is informed via the digital platform that their recipe suggestion has been included in the upcoming cycle.
- Where feedback cannot be acted on due to (for example) budget, allergen management, or nutritional requirements, the cook or service leader communicates this back to the person who provided it in a way that acknowledges their input and explains the reason.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA4, QA5, QA6, QA7

Reflective questions

- *How do we create meaningful opportunities for children to provide feedback about meals and menu options in ways that are appropriate to their age, communication style and level of participation?*
- *How effectively do educators observe, document and communicate children's responses to meals, including food preferences, engagement, enjoyment and food waste, to support menu improvement?*

OR

- *Are all children, including infants, non-speaking children and children with additional needs, provided with genuine opportunities to contribute feedback about meals and food experiences?*
- *How effectively does our service use feedback to reduce food waste while maintaining nutritional quality and variety?*
- *How do we ensure cooks, educators and families work collaboratively to support mealtime experiences and continuous improvement of menu quality?*

