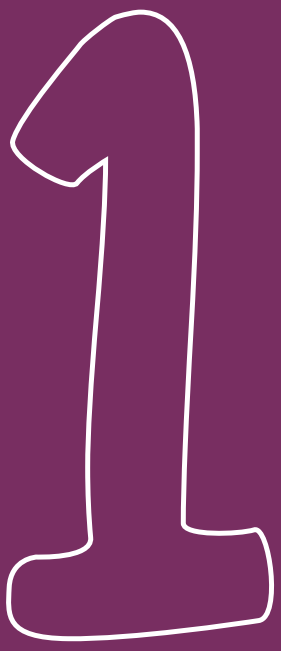
SECTION 1

Embedding Food-Based Learning in Everyday Practice



Embedding food-based learning in everyday practice

This section of the FE module focuses on developing engaging, play-based food experiences embedded in everyday practice in early childhood education and care settings.

It is designed to be used alongside the Mealtime Environment and Practices (MEP) module of the Best Practice Guide, which sets out the principles and practices for supportive, responsive mealtime environments. Where MEP focuses on the daily mealtime, this subtopic focuses on the play-based, child-led experiences that build children's curiosity, agency and learning through food across the day.

Food-based learning in context

ECEC settings play a vital role in providing time, space, safety and connection around food for young children. Play is both a process and context for learning in which children engage. They are curious to explore and pose questions. Embedding food-based learning through playful interactions can help young children develop a sense of belonging and build meaning from experience.

Food learning begins in the earliest experiences

If you've ever witnessed a baby learning to feed themselves, then you know how play and exploration go hand-in-hand with learning. When they smear yoghurt across their face, in their hair and up their nose, they are exploring the texture, smell, taste. They are engaging all their senses, playing with cause and effect and delighting in the process. Even before they have words, their communication attempts are often related to food, through signs, gestures or sounds, reaching for "more," pointing to their cup for "milk," or turning their head away when "all done".

Reflective questions

Educators

- *Think of a routine in your room. How could you deepen this to become a meaningful food related ritual? Are there any barriers that are stopping this from happening and how can they be overcome?*
- *In what ways do you foster children independence, agency and participation in preparing and caring for their mealtime environment?*
- *What observations have you made around children engagement with food related play? How have these observations informed your intentional input?*

Play as a pathway to food understanding

When a toddler engages in their first dramatic play experiences, it is in the home corner and play kitchen. They re-enact what they have witnessed every day in their home – they wash, mix, pour and cut their pretend food to serve to their dolls, peers and educators. Naturally, children are building their knowledge and understanding of food, food literacy and how it all connects to them, through their play and exploration.

Recognising the complexities of children's food experiences

It is important to keep in mind that for some children (and adults), food experiences are not always positive. For some, food and mealtimes can evoke stress, anxiety and uncertainty. Food security, food allergies, trauma, neurodivergence can all impact the experiences young children have with food. Being mindful of this when planning for and engaging in food experiences with young children can help to create safe and trusting environments.

Collaborating with children, families and the broader community is a powerful way to support inclusion, build trust and curiosity about food.

⚠ When food-based learning experiences occur, the safety and social inclusion of children with food allergies must also be considered. Where experiences are pre-planned, ensure that information is communicated to families of children with food allergies, and that these families are given the opportunity to comment or contribute.

See Section 2, page 57

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

Approaches to play-based experiences

The following outlines the different ways food education and learning experiences can happen. These range from intentionally planned experiences to those born from child-led interests and play, as well as opportunities for food education to be embedded within daily routines, including mealtimes.

Connecting play-based pedagogies and experiences with food education in ECEC

Intentional planning

Educators intentionally design and implement food-based experiences that extend children's learning. Through play, exploration and inquiry, food can become a driver for learning rather than being viewed solely for consumption.

Daily routines

Everyday moments such as mealtimes, eating occasions, and food preparation offer rich opportunities for learning. When approached with intention, these routines support agency, conversation, modelling, and confidence around food.

Mealtimes

Children's wellbeing, belonging and everyday food experiences sit at the heart of this Guide. The mealtime conditions that shape these experiences, including safe, calm, inclusive and responsive environments, food-neutral language, responsive feeding and role modelling, are explained in detail in the MEP module. The FE and MEP modules are designed to be read together. The play-based food experiences explored in this FE subtopic build on the everyday mealtime practices set out in MEP. Throughout this subtopic, where these terms appear, readers are pointed to the relevant section of MEP for full definitions and practice guidance. The case study, The Pom Pom Café, highlights this connection.

See Case study, page 20 of this module

Child-initiated play

Children often bring food into their play through dramatic play, home corner experiences, sensory play, and imaginative storytelling. When educators observe and respond to these interests, food becomes a meaningful context for exploration, identity-building, and inquiry.

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

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA5

How intentional planning shapes learning

Play-based pedagogies that are thoughtfully aligned with daily routines, environments and experiences, invite food to become a natural and engaging focus for learning. Intentional educators plan for and facilitate playful experiences that promote curiosity about food without expectations or pressure. In this way, food is used as a vehicle for exploration and inquiry, rather than just for consumption.

Creating low-pressure, inviting food experiences

Through intentionally planned experiences, food is presented in a low-pressure and inviting manner, giving children agency and opportunity to engage at their own pace. This intentionality from the educators ensures that food-based learning is seamlessly embedded throughout play, routines and experiences.

Practical ideas and examples of intentional planning for food-based learning are explored further in Section 3.

See Section 3, page 63

Daily routines

Shared food experiences form a natural part of children's everyday lives. When embedded through daily routines, they support learning and connection. Food-based learning doesn't sit in any one moment or routine of the day, it is continuous and relational. Children's sense of belonging, connection and shared responsibilities are strengthened over time when routines grow into shared practice and rituals.

From routine to ritual: creating meaning through shared food practices

The EYLF positions rituals as familiar and meaningful moments in a day that provide opportunities for deeper connection, wellbeing and learning potential. Viewed through the lens of food-based learning, everyday routines like mealtimes become rich, authentic opportunities for connection and learning. Below, we outline these common food-related routines and how they can be intentionally used, and deepened, into meaningful practices and rituals.

Common daily routines



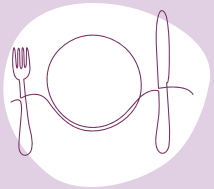
Handwashing before mealtime

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Singing a handwashing song
- Sequencing steps with visual prompts
- Experimenting with glitter to represent germs

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Singing a shared song together turns handwashing into a moment of connection.
- Washing hands side by side turns an individual routine into a shared act of caring, for themselves and for others.
- Repeating the same steps each day gives handwashing a familiar rhythm the group can rely on.
- Small, shared moments like this help children feel part of a group.



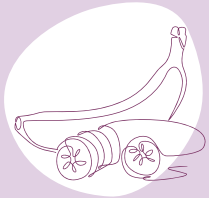
Transition to meal area

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Helping to set tables (placemats, plates, utensils)
- Collecting lunchboxes and placing on tables
- Serving jugs of water and cups
- Allocating roles to children (table helper, compost helper)

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Preparing the table together each day builds a predictable, shared routine children can count on.
- Letting children choose small touches, like a centrepiece, turns the table into a space that feels like theirs.
- Giving children a role, like table helper or compost helper, lets them take part in getting the space ready.



Morning tea

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Self-serving from shared platters
- Pouring own water from jugs
- Recognising and responding to hunger and 'had enough' cues

See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 2, page 19

- Having choice to decide what and how much to eat
- Engaging in conversations about food preferences and experiences
- Engaging socially with others and practising extended conversations and turn-taking

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- A predictable, calm space turns morning tea into a moment where children's bodies and needs are listened to with care and respect.
- Responsive feeding, such as a progressive mealtime, builds trust over time as children learn to tune into their own hunger and 'had enough' cues.

See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 7, page 55

- Consistent language and modelling build a shared understanding that hunger feels different for everyone.
- An unhurried pace allows morning tea to become a space to gather and connect.



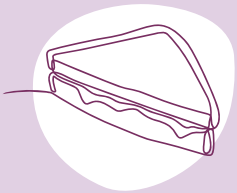
Lunch

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Sharing stories about food from home
- Noticing similarities and differences in lunchboxes (for lunchbox service centres)
- Exploring cultural food traditions
- Building food-based vocabulary around taste, texture and origin
- Sustaining conversations over a longer period
- Practising turn-taking by listening and responding to peers

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Lunch becomes more than a mealtime when treated as a shared gathering point, a moment in the day where things slow down and everyone comes together.
- A welcome or positive affirmation at the start of lunch signals a shared moment, inviting everyone in together.
- Sharing stories of culture, home and family during lunch turns eating together into a moment of genuine connection, where identities are seen and differences are met with curiosity and respect.
- Educators sitting and engaging alongside children during meals develop genuine, shared experiences.
- Repeated daily gathering turns lunch into a moment where children feel welcomed into the community and recognise their place at the table.



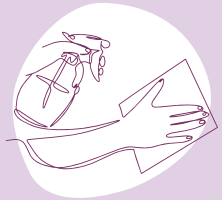
Afternoon tea

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Self-serving from shared platters
- Pouring own water from jugs
- Reflecting on the day's experiences together
- Engaging in sensory exploration of foods, noticing texture, smell, taste
- Practising turn-taking and sharing

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Afternoon tea becomes more than a snack when treated as a gentle transition, a moment of pause before the end of the day.
- Coming together to reflect on the day turns afternoon tea into a shared moment of connection.
- Slowing down for this thoughtful practice turns a small moment into something the group looks forward to, building shared memories and a sense of belonging.
- Serving themselves becomes an act of independence and an opportunity to notice and consider others' preferences and needs as well.
- A shared meal at the end of the day turns afternoon tea into a moment where relationships reset and connections are renewed.



Tidy up

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Managing spills and caring for the eating space
- Packing away dishes
- Wiping down tables
- Washing hands and face after eating
- Sorting compost and recycling

EXTENDING INTO RITUAL

- Tidying up together turns a routine task into a moment of shared community care.
- Wiping tables, packing away and cleaning dishes becomes a chance for children to show that they care for the space and for one another.
- Including recycling, sorting and composting as part of the tidy-up ritual allows children to see themselves as eco-citizens and to develop the understanding that their actions matter on a larger scale.
- Repeated shared actions turn tidy-up from a chore into a way children come to understand and care for the space, and for one another.

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

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

CASE STUDY

Mealtime rituals

A celebration of families and diverse mealtime practices

SERVICE	School of Early Learning West Leederville
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	6 months to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	160
NUMBER OF STAFF	39
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Perth, WA



Background

The School of Early Learning (SOEL) West Leederville is a large service with 160 places across 2 floors. Due to size of SOEL services, staff saw that it was important to intentionally build a sense of belonging and community for all children and families who attend. As part of these efforts, all SOEL services decided to focus on moving from routines to rituals in the baby and toddler age groups, and that included in the mealtime space.

Part of SOEL's ongoing professional learning involves staff from each room having a research focus, and over the past few years, transforming routines into rituals has been the dominant idea. Educators had begun learning about the importance of rituals in the ECEC space and wanted to start something to share mealtime rituals at SOEL, showcase to parents the rituals at the centre and learn about the children's rituals at home.

They began a collaborative book showcasing mealtime rituals at the centre. It was then sent home with families who filled it with their special mealtime rituals from home, which are then shared, celebrated and sometimes even incorporated into mealtimes at the centre.

What did you want to do?

- Communicate with families:
  - Share what they were doing in the service with families.
  - Increase communication with families.
  - Communicate a shared intention – meaningful rituals at mealtimes.
- Build community:
  - The overall goal was to bring everyone together by showing that everyone does things a bit differently, and celebrate these differences.
  - They also wanted something that could be interactive for families.
  - The Mealtimes Rituals book felt like the perfect way to do this.

What did you do?

Making the Mealtimes Rituals book

- They started the book by writing the rituals they did at the service during mealtimes across the day.
  - They used a simple, 120-page, A4 exercise book.
  - The older children created the cover page.
  - There is a sewing club in the older rooms, and children were asked to sew pictures onto a calico bag that would protect the book when it was sent home.
  - The front of the book contained a thank you to the sewing club children.
  - The first pages of the book contained information on rituals, the intention of the book and how to fill it out.

Using the Mealtimes Rituals book

- The book then started to be sent home, with families taking photos of their mealtimes rituals at home and decorating the pages with photos and pictures.
  - Parents could also email photos to the centre to print out if they weren't able to do it themselves.
  - Each child and family had their own page to fill out.
- Families then bring the book back and educators shared the mealtime ritual with the children, and even occasionally incorporated it into the centre's rituals.

What happens to the book when the children leave SOEL?

- When the children have finished at the centre, the books will be archived for a few years to document SOEL's work in this space.
  - Books that speak most loudly about the heart of SOEL will be kept and archived.
  - They will be converted to PDF and any faces blurred if necessary for privacy and anonymity.

The difference it has made

For educators and practice

- The addition of the mealtime rituals book has given educators the opportunity to add depth to their everyday experiences via incorporating practices from the children's homes:
  - Educators are able to highlight treasured moments in the lives of families at the service.
  - Educators use the book throughout mealtimes to slow down the centre's own mealtime rituals.
  - The book has also been a useful tool at the centre – they have found that when seeking ways to further support a child's mealtime experience, they can explore the child's individual mealtime ritual and draw on this knowledge to identify strategies that help the child feel settled and supported during mealtimes at the service.
- Staff have also seen that there is an opportunity to build upon this work by including rituals from other parts of the day.

For families

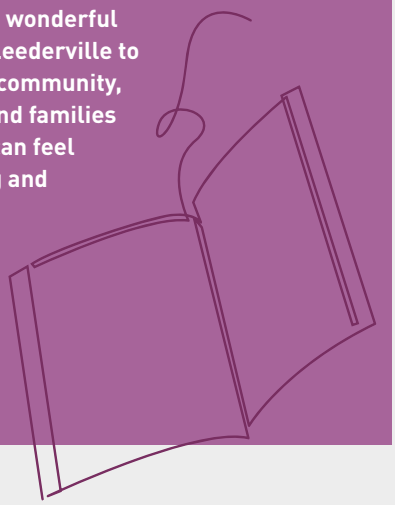
- They have had positive feedback from parents, with families eager to have a turn to add their mealtime rituals to the book.
- Families are able to see what others are doing during mealtimes at home, and learn from each other.

Top tips

- Start with 2-3 books so that if one book is out with a family, you can still work and teach from another book.
- Be clear on rules for adding photos to the book.
  - Consider advising families to avoid adding children's faces as the book will be sent home to different households and will be seen by people outside of the centre.
- If they had their time again, they would make the book more child-focussed than parent-focussed to encourage more involvement, especially from the older children.
- Some families can get really competitive about their page in the book!
  - Encourage families not to lose sight of the purpose of their entry.
  - Emphasise that the intent of the contribution is what is important (connection, conversation and experience), rather than how magnificent it looks.

The staff at SOEL West Leederville hope that the Mealtime Rituals book will be a living document that grows with the children, documenting the development of their mealtime rituals over time.

The book has been a wonderful way for SOEL West Leederville to create a welcoming community, where all children and families are celebrated and can feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.



CASE STUDY

The Pom Pom Café

A place for community, connection, learning and celebration

SERVICE	C&K Tully Community Kindergarten
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	Lunchbox service
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, not-for-profit
AGE RANGE	3 to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	66
NUMBER OF STAFF	6
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Outer regional

LOCATION

Tully, Queensland



Background

C&K Tully is a private, not-for-profit service, located in outer regional QLD. The service is licensed for 66 children over three rooms. It caters to children three to five years of age. Parents provide lunchboxes for the children's meals throughout the day. Currently the service employs 6 staff who make up the team. Their educational philosophy is grounded in the Reggio Emilia approach and has a focus on child-led and child-centred learning. The service is nature-based, with most of the day spent outdoors, has inclusivity and kindness at its core, and slow and flexible routines shape the day. They opened the Pom Pom Café in 2023 and have found it to be an amazing place for community connection, co-developing extended learning opportunities with the children and exploring and celebrating cultural diversity.

What did you want to do?

Through professional learning, staff were made aware that throughout the day there were plenty of positive interactions between staff and children, but mealtimes were an area that required support to increase these positive interactions. Staff wanted to find a way to make mealtimes:

- Less rushed.
- Less about directing and correcting.
- More about children enjoying meals when they felt hungry and eating at their own pace.
- More about having meaningful conversations at mealtimes that build oral communication skills, and build connections between people.

What did you do?

C&K Tully has received Uplift funding from the Queensland Government every year for the last four years. Uplift funding is designated to each service based on levels of socio-economic disadvantage and developmental vulnerability of the children and the services.

Services educating more children in areas of higher socio-economic disadvantage and who are developmentally vulnerable receive more funding to address developmental needs and decrease inequities caused by disadvantage.

- This funding has allowed staff to:
  - Engage in professional learning with educational consultants to improve their practice, for example in interactions with children during mealtimes.
  - Work with consultants to rethink and redesign how the service functions and works with children.
- Through working with consultants, discussion with parents, and a lot of critical reflection, the service decided to:
  - Start small with progressive morning and afternoon tea times (3-week trial).
  - Later move to progressive mealtimes (3-week trial).
  - Eventually the idea of the Pom Pom Cafe was born to incorporate progressive mealtimes, their outdoor environment, and support child agency in deciding when to eat.

Addressing parent concerns

There was some parent concern when progressive morning and afternoon tea were trialled. To address this concern, C&K Tully implemented processes during the trial period which have continued on to be used in the café:

Parent concern	Solution
Children who hadn't eaten would be overlooked and go hungry	A daily checklist of children's names to be marked off when they have eaten and record parent requests.
Parent wishes would not be accommodated in relation to mealtimes	A daily checklist of children's names to be marked off when they have eaten and record parent requests. Have a staff member present in the café throughout the day to speak with children and also supervise, monitor and record eating.
Children couldn't tell when they were hungry	Educators model listening to body messages throughout the day e.g. My tummy is grumbling – that means I might be hungry. I think I need something to eat. Posters are also placed around the play area to support children in tuning into their hunger and 'had enough' signals. Staff point to and discuss these throughout the day to remind children to tune into their body and then decide if they would like to go and eat.
Children who don't want to stop playing will never come and eat	Through building strong relationships with children, educators know which children may not want to stop playing in order to eat, so will give these children extra reminders.

Setup of the Pom Pom Café

- Located outdoors.
- Set up like a café – tables and chairs, tablecloths, decorative plants.
- Parents can come in and eat with their children at the café – this helps to build community connection.
- Has a closing time at 1pm to allow time to pack away.

What about hand hygiene?

- They have installed a handwashing station with individual towels in a bucket.
  - It takes 2 people to operate, so requires communication and teamwork.
  - To get the towels, the children practice their pincer grip and pinch the clean towel out of the clean bucket, then drop it into the used bucket.
- In the future, the centre will be getting a new handwashing station made by the men at the local Men's Shed.
  - This will be building on an existing community partnership with this Men's Shed where they have been fixing the centre's toy diggers for free.
  - The Men's Shed is keen to make the new handwashing station, that they will cost for the centre.
  - Funds for the handwashing station will be taken from those fundraised by C&K Tully's Community Advisory Group.
  - This act shows a commitment to keeping the cycle of community connectedness going at C&K Tully.

Is it easy to clean?

- Tablecloths:
  - Started with plastic tablecloths that are easy to wipe down.
  - Moved to cloth for a trial, and it was successful, however concerns remained about the risk of cross-contamination for children with allergies.
  - Solution – on days when children with food allergies attend, plastic tablecloths are still used as they can be cleaned more thoroughly between 'customers'.
- General cleaning:
  - With educator supervision, children are involved in cleaning up after they eat.
  - The centre provides child-sized equipment to encourage participation.
  - The idea is to develop independence, but also to build consideration of others by leaving the café tidy for the next visitors.
  - As the café is outside, staff can hose down the tables and floor at the end of the day as well.

What about supervision?

- The café is located in a part of the outside play area that allows the supervising educator to see the whole of the yard.
- There is another staff member out in the yard as well.
- Ratios are maintained at all times.
- Only 4-6 children come through the café at a time, and this also helps with supervision of eating and prevention of cross-contamination.

How did you name the café?

The children named it! It is located outside on the veranda, right under a big tree that has red flowers that look like pom poms! So, the children thought that would be the perfect name for the café.

The difference it has made

Conversations and connection

- The café has become a hub for learning about children's personalities, concerns, ideas.
  - It is a safe space for children to "unpack things they are worried about" and discuss what is happening in their lives – it's not all about the food, it's also about family and community connection.
- Has allowed for better quality conversations, and exploration of new topics with children as there is no need to rush. This is facilitated by the Chat Box:
  - A little box with questions in it that can be used as conversation starters.
  - This is kept in the café all the time.
  - The staff have noticed that children experiencing trauma tend to gravitate more towards the imaginative questions, so this is an important way for these children to relax, feel safe, be creative and build connections with staff and other children in a way that does not put pressure on them to think of things to say.
- Has helped to lower stress for both educators and children.
- Helps build children's language skills.
- Increases positive staff-child interactions.

Food exploration, extended learning and sensory support

- Has helped children explore new foods in a quiet, comfortable and safe environment.
  - This also supports children's foundational learning in health.
- Has led to extended experiences based on the seasons, like:
  - Bird watching – have added a bird watching book and identifying birds in the garden.
  - Cultural understanding and geography – have added a flag book and children identify which flags belong to which people in the service.
  - Looking at bugs and insects that are around and learning about them.
- The café has now expanded to the Pom Pom Lounge that is a soft place to rest outside.
  - It contains a large fish tank with fairies and books called Pom Pom Fairy World.
  - This space is perfect for a break from the playground, without having to move back inside – a gap recognised by staff through careful observation.
  - Can be used by all children, especially those who may have sensory needs, trauma, or are just tired and need a break.

What next?

Next, they may create some chat box cards that only have pictures and allow children to create a story from the pictures – this is especially useful for children who aren't yet reading.

Top tips

- "You don't need funds to start it, just the courage to jump".
- You will be "astounded by how competent and capable children are".
- Start with a trial.
- Begin with a checklist to mark off who has eaten and include parental requests, etc from the start.
- Include parent, staff and child feedback in the process.
- There will be bumps, but it is definitely worth trying this kind of system for mealtimes – "everyone loves it!"

Child initiated play

When children lead food-related play

In early childhood education, rich and meaningful learning experiences are often driven through child-led play and inquiry.

Making meaning through play

When children initiate food-related play, they are making sense of their lived experiences and drawing connections to new understandings. They are transferring what they know between different contexts, figuring out what it all means to them.

The educator's role in child-led food play

The role of the educator is to be responsive, to observe emerging interests and the focus of the play. In these instances, educators listen and observe closely, and use what they notice to offer subtle, intentional additions of materials, language or ideas that extend the play, without taking over its direction. What they notice in these moments also becomes the basis for future planning.

These subtle but intentional inputs empower children to be the leaders of their learning as they use play to build meaning from their own experiences. When food is provided in a familiar and meaningful context for their learning, positive connections and associations are strengthened.

Child-led food play in action

The following examples in practice provide a snapshot of child-led play scenarios with food and ways educators might scaffold and extend their learning.

A baby watches peers and educators during feeding time. They begin to mimic what they see by attempting to hold a spoon, banging their cup on the tray, dropping food and trying to bring objects to their mouth.

Educator observes: The baby watching others closely during mealtime and attempting to copy their actions through repetitive exploration.

Intentional input:

- Introduce mirror play during feeding to allow children to see themselves eating.
- Model language through external dialogue "I scoop my yoghurt". *See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 5, page 42*
- Introduce foods and utensils with differing textures to add sensory variation.

The children in a toddler's room are engaging in pretend cooking play with sand, mud, water and leaves. They mix 'ingredients' to make cakes and compare textures and make changes by adding more water or sand. They sing Happy Birthday to each other and blow out their pretend candles.

Educator observes: Children engaging in sensory exploration and testing theories by adding more water and sand to their mixture

Intentional input:

- Add more utensils, containers and fresh herbs to the play area to extend sensory exploration.
- Model rich language such as pours, mix, thick, watery, sticky.

Educator observes: Children engaging in symbolic play and social rituals when singing Happy Birthday and blowing out candles.

Intentional input:

- Read books about birthdays and how families celebrate special occasions to broaden cultural understanding.
- Include cake tin/muffin tray, recipe cards and pictures of cakes to the sand play area as a link to real-world experiences.

After a recent excursion to a community farm the children in the preschool room have been playing with blocks and animal figurines to create their own farms. Some children used the blocks to create enclosures for their animals. While others used the figurines to engage in dramatic play, taking on the role of farmers and animals.

Educator observes: Children creating fenced areas and grouping their animals intentionally (schema play).

Intentional input:

- Add other farm-related food items such as fruit and vegetables, along with enclosure material such as magnet tiles and sticks, to deepen children's symbolic and representational play.
- Model positional language during play such as beside, next to, inside, outside, between.

Educator observes: Children engaging in dramatic play by taking on the role of animals to act out their recent experience at the farm.

Intentional input:

- Add open-ended material such as loose parts to extend children's imaginative and symbolic thinking.
- Add photographs of the children on the excursion to the block area to deepen their connection to real-life experiences.
- Model narrative language "the farmer is feeding the cows" and farm-specific vocabulary: paddock, harvest, barn.

In a mixed age setting, older children are engaging in dramatic play in the home corner where they are preparing meals and serving food to others. The younger children are watching and imitating their actions by mixing, carrying bowls and offering food to dolls, peers and educators.

Educator observes: Children engaging in play that mirrors home-like experiences including negotiating social roles and mimicking cultural practices.

Intentional input:

- Invite children to engage in 'cooking' using salt-dough to add food props to the home corner, deepening the connection between dramatic play and the real world.
- Add family photos to the home corner to deepen the connection between the care setting and home.
- Introduce real-life materials that reflect diverse family structures, cultures and traditions, helping children to see themselves represented.

Educator observes: Children closely watching one another with older children modelling and younger children imitating.

Intentional input:

- Invite the older children to act as 'mealtime mentors' for the younger children. Here they take on the role of the 'adult' in serving, engaging with and supporting younger children during mealtimes to extend older children's leadership and younger children's imitation.

Educator observes: Younger children engaging in early symbolic play where they are using pretend items to represent lived experiences and ideas.

Intentional input:

- Sit alongside children and narrate their play, "You're making some food for your friends", "Oh, the pie is still hot".
- Include mealtime rituals into the space, such as singing a familiar song or wiping the table, to deepen children's connection between play and real-life experiences.
- Add small containers for filling and emptying or water alongside cooking play to support sensory exploration and symbolic representation.

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

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA2, QA3, QA5