SECTION 5

Partnerships and Collaboration for Food Education Opportunities



Collaborative and inclusive partnerships

Developing and maintaining collaborative and inclusive partnerships can enrich and enhance food and nutrition education. These partnerships can help make children's food education experiences inclusive and community informed, while supporting both the educational program and menu quality.

Partnerships can be developed with community organisations, cultural groups, and families. The following case studies show how this can look in practice:

Cultural groups

Cooking on Country shows a collaborative partnership between education, community, public health and families.

See Case study, page 102 of this module

Families

Culture and community co-designed, describes how ECEC staff worked together with families and children to create a community-informed cookbook that also supports the quality and inclusivity of the service's menu.

See Case study, page 104 of this module

Community organisations

The case study, *Hopping along to Little Joey's Community Garden*, demonstrates a partnership with a local farm to enhance food and nutrition education.

See Case study, page 106 of this module

The *Nourishing Little Minds*® case study outlines the program and how it was created by nutrition and public health experts in collaboration with early childhood experts to create a resource that was relevant, useable, and empowered ECEC educators to enrich and enhance food and nutrition education in their services.

See Case study, page 108 of this module

Reflective questions

Educators

- *How do you invite family knowledge, recipes and traditions into your food education program in a way that feels genuinely collaborative? How do we help families see the value this holds for their child?*

Service leadership team

- *Is there a community organisation your service already has a relationship with, even in another context, that could enrich food education if the partnership were extended?*
- *What would a genuine, reciprocal partnership with a cultural group in your community look like for your food education program?*



CASE STUDY

Cooking on Country

Community and allied health partnerships enhancing cultural knowledge, literacy, numeracy and child health and development

SERVICE	Indi Kindi
SERVICE TYPE	Blended – occasional care, mobile
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Not-for-profit, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
AGE RANGE	Birth to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	Ad hoc, average of 5–6 children per day
NUMBER OF STAFF	5-6 educators
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Very remote

LOCATION

Borroloola, Robinson River, Tennant Creek, Mungkarta, NT



Background

Indi Kindi is an on Country, early education program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to five years of age. Established in 2012 by Moriarty Foundation, an ACCO, the program is currently delivered in the Northern Territory communities of Borroloola, Robinson River, Tennant Creek, and Mungkarta.

Indi Kindi incorporates on Country cultural and educational experiences with best-practice, evidence-informed pedagogical approaches, in a unique curriculum called Walking Learning®. This curriculum aligns with the EYLF while also prioritising culturally rich and safe learning for children and families.

Indi Kindi runs three to four times per week, with local Aboriginal educators leading all sessions outdoors on Country, passing down their culture and providing culturally appropriate education. Families are welcome to join any session, and often extended family join the children as well.

Indi Kindi provides transport from the community where educators deliver sessions so that children and families can go together on Country for the day. Learning occurs in 'classrooms without walls', where local Aboriginal educators lead outdoor sessions on Country that foster a deep sense of belonging and cultural connection.

Indi Kindi has evolved from an early literacy initiative into a holistic service that integrates education, health, nutrition, and hygiene.

To improve developmental outcomes, the program embeds critical touchpoints – such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK) developmental assessments and referrals to health professionals – directly into the daily learning flow. Programs are developed and led by community members to ensure cultural safety and relevance.

To ensure equitable and culturally secure access, the program features several key design elements:

- **Community-led governance:** The program is guided by local Community Advisory Groups in Borroloola and Tennant Creek.
- **Local leadership:** Sessions are led by local Aboriginal female educators who act as a bridge between formal curriculum and traditional cultural knowledge, passing down culture to the next generation.
- **Family inclusion:** The service is completely free and provides a bus for pick-ups and drop-offs, encouraging parents, caregivers, and extended family to attend sessions together on Country.

By placing the child at the centre of family and culture, Indi Kindi has achieved transformational impacts, including a significant reduction in the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable when they enter school.

As part of Indi Kindi's Walking Learning® sessions, they provide Cooking on Country experiences so that children and families can learn about traditional food and cooking techniques.

What did you want to do?

Staff at Indi Kindi wanted to:

- Teach children and families about traditional bush foods available in their local area, and how to cook them.
- Teach children and families about bush medicine.
- Bring bush tucker into the program.
- Create early learning practices that are centred in culture.

What did you do?

To get started with Cooking on Country, staff:

- Identified bush foods to bring into the program.
  - Bush foods are incorporated as well as foods purchased locally.
- Worked with nutritionists to plan the menu.
- Introduced new foods slowly to children:
  - Learned skills to introduce foods to children from nutritionists.
  - There is no pressure for children to eat, and the slow introduction of foods helps children to become used to different foods.
- Found fun ways to connect children to the food they eat.
  - For example, decorating crackers using nutritious toppings to make faces and fruit creations for Halloween instead of lollies.

Cooking on Country

Cooking on Country gives children the opportunity to build a deep connection to culture and Country:

- Using bush foods and traditional cooking methods happens organically throughout the day as part of the program:
  - Educators start up the fire and make Johnny Cakes/ damper and prepare the bush tucker with the children.
  - Children go fishing with the educators and learn how to catch, prepare and cook the fish:
    - > Educators are role models and teach children in traditional cultural ways, like calling out to ancestors when they go fishing, as part of their cultural development.
    - > Educators take children to collect shellfish for bait and show them how to prepare it to put it on the hook.
    - > This is inquiry-based learning that is also sensory, relational and place-based – a rich learning experience.
- Elder women come to share language and explain the 'why' of cooking on Country.

What about handwashing, food preparation and cleaning up?

Educators take all handwashing equipment with them when they go on Country, and this includes:

- Hand soap.
- Portable basin.
- Hand towels.
- Baby wipes.
- Sanitiser.

For food preparation educators take:

- Gloves.
- Utensils.
- Surface to prepare food.

For clean-up educators take everything they need to rinse dishes, and take them back to the hub for a proper wash after the session:

- Rinsing bucket.
- Rubbish bag.
- Care box – tissues, wipes, first aid, nappies, etc.

Indi Kindi teaches the children that they leave the location as they found it. This teaches them about caring for Country, sustainability and environmental responsibility.

The difference it has made

- Improved developmental and health outcomes for children.
- Educators have become advocates for their community and culture.
- The program helps develop the capacity of children and families to use traditional foods and cooking methods.
- Cultural food and cooking knowledge that may have been lost is being passed on to the next generation.

Top tips

- Work with your local community advisory group before you do anything.
  - They have the knowledge to ensure your program will be culturally appropriate.
- Make connections and build relationships first, before expecting people to come into the service.
  - This takes time and patience, and trust needs to be built.
  - Showing an interest in the stories and language of the area is a great start for this work.
- Cooking on Country has to be responsive to the area in which you are working:
  - For example, desert vs coastal communities will have different cultural foods and cooking methods.
- Build a team from the area.
  - Local women are often the knowledge holders of what to cook on Country and can give guidance on protocols.

CASE STUDY

Culture and community co-designed

The Turtle Cove recipe book

SERVICE	Turtle Cove Wandina Early Learning Centre
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	3 months to 4 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	59
NUMBER OF STAFF	30
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Outer regional

LOCATION

Wandina, WA



Background

Turtle Cove Wandina is one of three Turtle Cove Early Learning Centres and one Turtle Cove Out of School Hours services located in Geraldton, WA. It is a private, for-profit service in outer regional WA. The service is licensed for 59 children each day, with staff rostered to provide education and care according to appropriate ratios. They are a Christian-based service, with kindness, compassion and giving back making up the foundation of the service's values.

The recipe book was borne from the needs of the families and children at the service. The service created a recipe book for families via extensive consultation with the children, families and staff of the service. It reflects the cultural diversity and traditions of the Turtle Cove community that helped to create it, providing a rich resource for sharing and learning, not just about food, but about each other.

The recipe book is still in development but is due to be completed in late 2026.

What did you want to do?

- Staff noticed that families were saying that their child ate well at the service but was not eating nutritious meals at home.
- Families would then ask the staff what the cook was making and ask for recipes.
- Staff would send home recipes with a take-away box of the meal, ensuring the food was handled and stored in line with food safety procedures and local regulations.
  - This way, the family could taste the meal together at home and then make it themselves.
- After doing this for a few years, and reviewing their sustainability practices, staff realised that making these copies of recipes for families was not sustainable, but the need for the recipes was still there.
- So, the idea came about that they should create a recipe book for families.

What did you do?

As part of Turtle Cove Wandina's enrolment process, families are encouraged to fill out a 'Curious about Culture' form where they include their child's favourite foods from home, and cultural meals. These are also included in the centre's menu where possible.

This is a great way to develop an inclusive partnership with families to enrich and enhance food and nutrition education collaboration.

The book was initially only going to contain centre recipes, but over time broadened to include:

- Cultural recipes from families collected over time and via the 'Curious about Culture' forms filled out at enrollment, like Dhal and South African Curry.
- Traditional bush tucker.
- Mealtime practices at the service, like getting children involved in the cooking process.
  - They have found that this encourages children to try the food that they make.
  - Turtle Cove demonstrates this through 'Turtle Tucker Time'.
  - This is regularly scheduled time at the centre where children get involved in preparing food, cooking and tasting experiences.

Steps to creating the community recipe book in collaboration with children and families:

- Staff monitored demand for recipes over time based on how many they were handing out and family feedback.
- Staff then asked if families and children wanted the service's recipes in a book format.
  - Families indicated that they did, so the decision was made to print the cookbook.
- Families, staff and children contributed to the recipes in the book.
  - The book is a collaboration with children drawing their interpretations of the meals, which will then be added to the cookbook.
- Families are then invited to come in and cook with the children on the day their recipe is made.

The difference it has made

- The family response has been overwhelmingly positive.
- Families are reporting that the children are eating more nutritious food at home and that they are cooking together at home more often.
- One parent even came in to watch the cook prepare one of the recipes so that she could learn how to do it herself!

Top tips

The process took around two years to complete. This meant that:

- It was a very organic process, heavily driven by community engagement.
- It didn't feel like extra workload on staff.
- It felt like structure was put in place to support what they were already doing.

The staff at Turtle Cove Wandina recommend working with staff, families and children at the service to develop the recipe book. This ensures:

- It reflects the cultural diversity and traditions of the community.
- Recipes are included that children enjoy eating.
- Community participation and connection are enhanced.
- Children are given the opportunity to contribute in many different ways, like:
  - Suggesting meals to include.
  - Creating artworks to decorate the pages.

All of this works towards increasing community involvement at the service, and a greater understanding and appreciation of a service's diversity, creating a closer, more connected community.

CASE STUDY

Hopping along to Little Joey's Community Garden

Building partnerships to create extended curriculum and learning opportunities

SERVICE	Little Joey's Early Learning Centre
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	6 weeks to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	80
NUMBER OF STAFF	30
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Narre Warren East, VIC



Background

Little Joey's Early Learning Centre is located in the semi-rural area of Narre Warren East in Victoria. They have a lot of space, a lot of time outdoors, and a program called Little Joey's Community Garden, run in partnership with the farm next door.

At the farm, the farmer runs a bush kinder where the children at Little Joey's learn all about where food comes from, how to look after it, harvest it and cook with it. They also learn about the lifecycles of different animals on the farm and enjoy close encounters with them throughout the year.

An element of the Community Garden is the fruit and vegetable garden at the service that is looked after by the staff and children, with excess produce shared with all families at the service.

What did you want to do?

They accepted the invite from the farm to create a partnership in order to:

- Become more embedded in the community.
- Allow children to have a unique farm experience where they also learned about farming and where foods come from.

They established the Community Garden at the service to:

- Bring the gardens back to life around the service.
- Teach children about the process of planting and growing food.
- Build independence and life skills in children.
- Help children understand the importance of growing with the seasons, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seasons.
- Help children understand that they are a part of their environment by being involved in maintaining the garden and collecting food scraps for compost.

See Sustainable Food Practices, Section 6, page 75

What did you do?

The partnership

This partnership grew over a few years, starting with conversations between the director and the farmer. From there it has grown into a full program, based at the farm, that the children at Little Joey's can enjoy from the start of their time at the service.

Logistics

Fees:

- The Bush Kinder incurs a fee that is included in the childcare fees that parents pay to the service.

Prior to excursion day:

- Risk assessments are completed and appropriate documentation is collected for the adults involved in the excursion (e.g. Working With Children Checks).
- Parents are informed about which day the children will be going to the farm via email.
- Little Joey's uses an ongoing permission system (updated annually) for going to the farm as it is such a regular and embedded experience at the service.

On excursion day:

- As the farm is within walking distance from Little Joey's, the children are able to get there by walking, being carried or going in prams.
- Every age group goes to the farm, including babies.
- In consultation with the service's educators, the farmer sets up activities that are developmentally appropriate for the children to experience.
- The farmer meets the children and staff at the Little Joey's entrance and walks them over to the farm.
- Around 20 children and 3-4 staff attend at a time, sometimes with a parent supporting as well.
- The farmer facilitates the Bush Kinder experience on the farm, with the support of staff.
  - Educators remain to supervise at all times and do not leave children alone with the farmer. This ensures child safety and that the relevant laws and regulations are followed.

Community garden

- To bring the gardens back to life, educators and children plan what they want to grow, and where and when they will plant it.
- Each room is responsible for planting, watering and harvesting produce.
  - These tasks form a part of the daily routine and program in each room.
  - This has now turned into a little competition between the different rooms at the service, with each room trying to grow the most or the best food.
- Some of the plants are grown from seed and are started inside the room for the children to observe, and then planted out into the garden beds outside when they are ready.
- Extra produce is donated to families at the service.
- The director lets families know there is extra produce available by:
  - Emailing families.
  - Placing baskets at the front of the service with signs encouraging families to take whatever they would like.

The difference it has made

- Children have developed an appreciation for the work involved in growing food.
- Children's understanding of food waste has increased as they understand the work involved in getting the food from the garden to the plate.
- Community awareness of the activities of the service has increased, and there has been a boost to the service's reputation.
- Community bonds have been strengthened through the partnership with the farm and sharing excess produce with families.

Top tips

- If you have a special program or project to run, ensure there is a staff or family member with the passion to get it running and keep it going.
- You can have a community garden in the city as well.
- Try using raised beds, plants in pots or plants in hanging baskets instead of a whole garden.
- Create community relationships and partnerships with whatever services and resources are around you. This could be:
  - An aged care facility where the children go and help the residents with their gardens, or the residents come in and tell the children stories.
  - A relationship with the local bakery where they come into the service and cook something with the children.
  - A partnership with the local nursery where nursery staff come in and teach the children about growing something.
- When starting your garden:
  - Know your environment and plan where to put things before planting – you will get better results
  - Get someone in to consult, like a family member or another member of the community who is keen on gardening, to help get the garden off to a great start.

CASE STUDY

Nourishing Little Minds® in ECEC

A positive food exposure program for ECEC, co-developed with the sector

ORGANISATION	Nutrition Australia ACT
ORGANISATION TYPE	Community nutrition organisation
BUSINESS MODEL	Not-for-profit
NUMBER OF ECEC SERVICES REACHED	79
NUMBER OF STAFF REACHED	1,075
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Australian Capital Territory



Background

Nourishing LittleMinds® in ECEC (NLMECEC) is a program that delivers professional development for ECEC educators in long day care and family day care. Aligned with the EYLF, NLMECEC combines early childhood literacy with experiential play-based learning to enrich children's awareness, interest, enjoyment, and exposure to a variety of foods. The program was developed in consultation with the ECEC sector to be relevant, useable, and to help ECEC staff and children build confidence around talking about and exploring different foods.

What did you want to do?

- Support educators to apply a non-food approach to positive food exposure, with a particular emphasis on vegetables, that increases children's curiosity and internal motivation to enjoy these foods:
  - Reduce food neophobia by helping children learn about new foods in a safe and supportive way.
  - Provide children with positive experiences with food via non-food methods.
  - Use engaging food-related activities that pique children's interest and curiosity.
  - Make experiences play-based.
- Upskill ECEC educators with knowledge, skills, and confidence to embed regular food-related activities into centre programming.

What did you do?

Program design

Initial engagement of an expert steering group to ensure the ECEC perspective was central to program development. Advisory Group members were:

- Directors from local ECEC services.
- Children's Education and Care Assurance, ACT Education Directorate.
- Early Childhood Australia representative.

The Advisory Group's role was to guide and advise on program development, ensuring alignment with the EYLF.

The program was designed as educator professional learning, with development of an associated educator manual containing the following sections:

- Learning activities – 13 learning activities each comprising:
  - Links to the EYLF.
  - Instructions on delivering the activity.
  - Relevant associated resources such as literature or templates.
  - Reflection questions for children.
- Book ideas – curated list of children's literature with positive food-related themes.
- Songs and rhymes – curated list of food-related songs and rhymes.
- Food preparation activities – food preparation tips including six basic recipes with educator guide and take-home recipes.

- Family information fact sheets aligned with responsive feeding practices.
- Templates for use in learning activities.
- Links to further resources.

Program pilot

- A grant was procured from ACT Health to fund the development of the project.
- Recruited 79 long day care services in the ACT to pilot the program. Services were engaged through ACT ECEC newsletter mailing list. Invitations to participate were sent out via this list.

Each participating ECEC Service received:

- A two-hour, face to face educator PD session held after hours at the service.
  - This ensured maximum participation.
- A printed Educator Manual with a suite of activities that had been pilot tested previously.
  - These activities were created in collaboration with the project's Steering Group.
  - All of the activities were linked across each of the five Learning Outcomes of the EYLF.
- Resource tub comprising:
  - 12 selected children's storybooks that were most commonly referred to in the Educator Manual.
  - Set of laminated templates from the Educator Manual.
  - Crafting materials (felt, stickers and paddle pop sticks) for group crafting activities during the PD session
- The PD sessions:
  - Focussed on how educators can facilitate play-based food exposure opportunities for children in non-food ways.
  - Allowed time for ECEC educators to brainstorm how they might utilise the resources in their centre and customise them to their needs.
  - Addressed positive language and role modelling around food.

It wasn't nutrition education – it was activities that linked to the EYLF that:

- Exposed children to different foods, vegetables especially, through books, songs, activities and games.
- Brought in elements of food, without it being about playing with or tasting food – e.g. instead of playing Duck, Duck, Goose, we would suggest Carrot, Carrot, Tomato.

Cost

The pilot program was delivered free as it was funded by the ACT Government under the ACT Health, Healthy Canberra Grants Program. Now it is a fee-for-service program.

The educator manual is available online for Nutrition Australia ECEC Food Foundations subscribers.

The difference it has made

After the delivery of NLMECEC to ECEC staff, ECEC directors were contacted for feedback on how the program was running.

After three months:

- Most directors said they loved the training.
- Directors reported that the program was engaging and fun.
- Directors said it gave them agency to follow up activities on the floor.
- There was a positive shift in educators supporting children's curiosity and engagement with food.
- More cooking activities were happening.

After six months, directors reported they were:

- Still positive about the program.
- Still using the books.
- Noticed educators talking positively around mealtimes.
- The program had been effective in increasing children's positive relationship with food.
- Children were more interested at mealtimes.
- The books and activities helped.

NLMECEC empowered educators to:

- Use the resources and create even more ideas from it.
- Feel they could guide some of these activities and tailor them to their service's needs.
- Increase confidence in how they talk to children about food and implement activities.

Top tips

- ECEC staff are the experts in working with children in the early years of life. It is important to engage with them and get their input to:
  - Ensure the resource is relevant and useful.
  - Learn how to connect with services in the ways that suit them.
  - Ensure activities are developmentally appropriate and feasible within an ECEC setting.
- When conducting face-to-face interactive PD sessions, cap groups at 20 people per session.
- Have a follow up session every year to teach new staff and to reinforce messages with those who have already done the course.