SECTION 4

Supporting Families at Lunchbox Services



Unpacking lunchboxes

What are the contexts that ECEC staff need to understand and consider when it comes to lunchboxes

When it comes to lunchboxes, ECEC services need to acknowledge and understand the family/home context and how this may impact or influence lunchbox provision. For example, below are some of the factors that may impact lunchbox provision.

Where children attend both an ECEC service and a school (e.g. kindergarten or foundation transition programs), services should work collaboratively with schools to promote consistent messaging about lunchbox guidance and food safety where appropriate. Educators should recognise that school policies and mealtime practices may differ from those in ECEC settings, and these differences can sometimes be confusing for children and families. Establishing positive relationships with local schools can support continuity of care and communication.

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Understanding responsibilities

What is the ECEC service responsible for?

It is important to recognise where the various responsibilities lie when it comes to lunchboxes as this provides guidance on the type of support that families may require. The responsibility for foods provided in lunchboxes is not with the service but the families, therefore much of this is out of control for the ECEC service.

Food safety duties are shared. Families are responsible for packing and transporting food safely. The service is still responsible for how food is stored, handled and served once it arrives, and for hygiene at mealtimes, under Regulations 77 and 78 of the National Regulations. Further, under Regulation 168 services must have appropriate policies in place related to the storage and provision of lunchboxes.

Factors that may impact lunchbox provision

Time
Time is required to plan, purchase, and prepare the foods that get packed in a lunchbox. Lunchboxes are often packed late at night or in a rush before work, and families with several children requiring lunchboxes may have very little time to pack them.

Cost pressures
Food costs have risen and some families may have to choose between quantity and variety. Fresh food also costs more in regional and remote towns.

Cultural food practices
Cultural and religious food practices, requirements, and traditions can be represented and celebrated in lunchboxes.

Child needs and preferences
A child may be undergoing feeding therapy, may have allergies, or may have a small number of foods they will accept – families know their child best. What is in the lunchbox may involve careful planning to ensure their child is fed.

See Vignette 4, page 54 of this module

Family routines and circumstances
The family member responsible for packing the lunchbox may experience circumstances which affect their ability to pack a lunchbox (such as illness, fatigue, shift work schedules, or limited knowledge of preparing foods for the lunchbox). This could also include unreliable access to fresh food, or a fridge to safely store it.

The ECEC remains responsible for:

- Providing a safe mealtime – support children's health, wellbeing and inclusion
- Allowing children to access the foods in their lunchbox if they are hungry outside of scheduled mealtimes
- Food safe practices – storage, handling, and supervision of lunchboxes
- Managing food allergies and dietary requirements – ensuring children with food allergies are known by all educators, have access to medication and action plans, communicating known allergens to other families if necessary
- Providing clear expectations and information

What are families responsible for?

Lunchbox provision responsibility lies with families. To align with the Division of Responsibility model outlined in the Mealtime Environment and Practices Guide (Section 2), the following describes the responsibilities of the family, ECEC and child:

- **Family:** decides what is packed in the lunchbox
- **ECEC:** offer safe mealtime opportunities for children to eat
- **Child:** decide whether to eat, and how much to eat, from what has been packed.

Families are also responsible for:

- **Food safety –** providing insulated lunchboxes if possible, ensuring food is cut to reduce choking risk (where applicable), providing food that is safe for their child to eat and handle near others (e.g. does not contain any allergens that should be excluded)
- **Medical or cultural needs –** Informing the service of any allergies, cultural considerations, child's eating needs
- **Communicating** with the service regarding goals, nutrition, feeding, safe foods, sensory requirements

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What are the contexts that families need to understand and consider when providing lunchboxes

Lunchbox storage

Families should be informed where lunchboxes are stored. For example, families should be aware of whether the service has a fridge to store lunchboxes and their contents (and can the contents stay inside the lunchbox, or are they taken out and need to be individually labelled?)

Lunchbox access and provision

Families need to understand how lunchboxes are offered and at what times of the day. For example, do foods need to be provided in separate containers for different mealtimes? This includes families being made aware of whether food can be reheated prior to eating.

Families should know whether children can access their lunchbox if they are hungry outside of scheduled mealtimes.

Children's independence

Families should understand the importance of packing foods that their child can safely and independently manage where developmentally appropriate. This supports confidence, self-help skills and participation during mealtimes.

Food preparation

Families need to know whether foods can be reheated by staff, or if they should be prepared before arriving at the service (e.g. fruit peeled, oranges quartered, lids loosened, packaging removed, grapes cut according to safe food guidelines). Families should understand any expectations regarding reusable containers, minimising packaging, and supporting environmentally sustainable practices where appropriate.

Food allergen management

Families need to be made aware of any food allergen management procedures, including whether certain foods are restricted or discouraged to help minimise the risk of allergic reactions.

Labelling

Lunchboxes, drink bottles, and containers should be clearly labelled with the child's name.

Whole-service consistency

Families should understand that mealtime practices are guided by the service's policies, food safety requirements and approved learning frameworks to ensure equitable and consistent practice for all children.

A holistic approach to lunchboxes

Considering lunchboxes holistically

What does 'considering lunchboxes holistically' mean? A holistic approach to lunchboxes means considering lunchboxes through more than one element.

For example:

- *Is it safe?*
- *Is the child being fed, is there enough to eat?*
- *Is the child happy to eat this meal?*
- *Are the food textures appropriate for this child?*
- *Does the lunchbox provide food to meet the nutritional needs of the child?*
- *Can the child access the food? (e.g. open containers)*

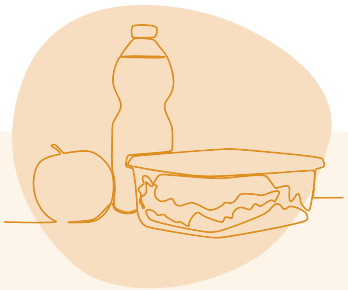
Whilst the above elements allow us to consider lunchboxes in a holistic way, it is important to note however that what may be 'appropriate' in each element will be up to individual circumstances. Child preferences can be tricky to cater for as they frequently change, therefore guidance should stay general rather than catering to preferences.

A comment about staff reactions to lunchboxes

Having a holistic approach and understanding of lunchboxes supports educators to reflect on and support their own communication when it comes to mealtimes at lunchbox services. For example, some children may have a limited number of safe foods that they accept. Passing judgement on foods in a child's lunchbox may be enough to make the food drop off their list.

Labelling foods as 'good', 'bad', 'healthy', 'junk', or 'treats', comparing lunchboxes, or praising or criticising the contents of a child's lunchbox can contribute to shame, guilt or anxiety around eating. Instead, educators should remain neutral, support children's autonomy, and focus on creating positive mealtime experiences where all children feel safe and included.

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VIGNETTE 4

Complexity of lunchboxes

Three-year-old Mikey attends your ECEC service on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Your ECEC service does not have a kitchen, and families supply food each day in a lunchbox. Staff are concerned because Mikey's lunchbox only contains two small bags of crunchy corn-based snacks, and a pack of potato chips.

When you speak to Mikey's parent, they explain that he is engaging in feeding therapy.

What is happening here?

Children may develop feeding difficulties for many reasons. They may have missed the opportunity to gain necessary feeding skills because they were born early, had many illnesses early in life, or may have developmental delays or sensory preferences. Children who have unpleasant associations with food such as pain associated with gastro-oesophageal reflux, or reactions to foods due to food allergy may also develop feeding difficulties.

Children with feeding difficulties may see a variety of health professionals to help with their nutrition and feeding skills. These may include paediatric dietitians, speech pathologists and occupational therapists.

Children who are having feeding therapy are often encouraged to eat dry and crunchy foods. For these children, foods like potato chips or crunchy corn-based snacks might be the only food in their lunchbox.

There are many steps in the process of learning to eat a new food. One model uses 8 steps to help a child learn about eating a new food.[8] The steps include sight (looking at a food) > touch > smell > lick > taste > bite > chew > swallow. Children with feeding difficulties might be learning about new foods using any of these steps – before they are able to chew and commit to swallowing a food.

Supporting and communicating with families around lunchboxes

Providing feedback and support to families on lunchboxes

How can services support families who provide lunchboxes, and how is this support provided? When taking into consideration:

- A holistic understanding of lunchboxes
- the contexts and circumstances which influence lunchbox provision
- the division of responsibilities when it comes to provision.

Communication with families about lunchboxes needs to be:

Sensitive and supportive

- Recognising time-poor nature of families (for those in regional towns – isolation pressure can also impact lunchbox provision).
- Tailoring to families that need extra support.
- Approaching the subject with, empathy, curiosity and objectivity.
- Acknowledging and supporting cultural and religious food practices, including halal and kosher requirements, vegetarian and other dietary practices, foods prepared for religious observances, and celebration foods that matter to a family or may be unfamiliar to educators.

Adopt a strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach includes:

- Highlighting the positive things that families are already doing.
- Sharing information to all families in a supportive rather than directive manner (e.g. on the important role of food in children's growth).
- Inviting families to share recipes, tips and ideas.
- Avoiding practices that create shame (e.g. 'stickers' sent home in lunchboxes denoting 'bad' foods).

Families are more likely to seek support and share challenges when they feel respected and listened to.

Consistent and accessible support

Communication techniques around lunchboxes may be:

- Part of a welcome pack upon induction e.g. this is what we suggest.
- Educational booklet (rather than targeting specific people).
- Recipes of simple lunchbox foods.
- Posters or photo's of lunchbox ideas, which can also be based on seasonal foods.

Ensure any information and resources provided are accessible by considering literacy levels, language needs and preferred methods of communication of families.

Setting these practices out in a policy, clearly communicated to staff, helps ensure they happen consistently rather than occasionally (e.g. through e-news, the service phone application, or during lunchbox week).

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Type of support which can be provided

There are a range of areas where information can be provided to families when it comes to lunchboxes, however it is important to provide information based on family needs:

What to include in lunchboxes

Families often ask for information of what they should pack in lunchboxes. Some services provide pictures of different lunchboxes as examples, including a range of foods. Lunchboxes need to represent what is suitable for each child, including appropriate quantity, texture, and nutrition.

What foods to avoid in lunchboxes

Some services may request certain foods to be avoided in lunchboxes, such as peanut butter or other sticky nut pastes where there are children attending the service that have peanut/tree nut allergies.

How much food to include

Families may also want to know how much food to provide for each meal, a visual would help with this.

Food safety

Guidance on age-appropriate foods, including choking risks, and safe transportation of lunchboxes with cold packs, insulated containers, etc.

Diversity and variety

Including small amounts of unfamiliar foods, alongside familiar foods, can increase a child's exposure to new foods, even if they don't eat it.

Lunchbox nutrition

Provide lunchbox ideas and recipes that support nutritional balance and meet children's nutritional needs based on their age (e.g. baby lunchbox, toddler lunchbox).

Whole-service consistency

Families should understand that mealtime practices are guided by the service's policies, food safety requirements and approved learning frameworks to ensure equitable and consistent practice for all children.

Reflective questions

- *To what extent do our interactions with children and families reflect a strengths-based approach that avoids judgement, comparison or criticism of lunchbox contents?*

OR

- *When concerns arise about a lunchbox, do we approach families with curiosity and partnership, or do our assumptions influence the conversation?*
- *Do our lunchbox policies and practices genuinely support equity and inclusion for all families, or might they unintentionally disadvantage some families?*
- *How do our mealtime environments and educator practices promote children's autonomy, belonging and positive relationships with food?*

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Managing areas of concern

The previous section outlines the type of information that could be provided to support families. However, there may be times where specific areas of concern may arise, Table 3 provides a starting point for some areas of concern.

TABLE 3: *Managing areas of concern*

Area	Areas of concern	Further support strategies
Food safety	• Ensuring food (lunchbox) is transported and stored safely • Keeping cold food cold • Clean lunchboxes • Safe reheating practices of hot foods (if that is offered) • Appropriate food size and texture to reduce choking risk • Cross-contamination risk for children with food allergies	• See food safety information on next page • Food Standards Australia New Zealand – Safe reheating guidance • *See Section 6, page 63*
Food insecurity	The child does not have enough food for the entire day.	To support families who may be experiencing food insecurity, services can: • Offer information about local food relief opportunities (either in private conversations or as generic information provided to all families). • Host a 'food donation shelf', where families can bring in food to share. • Keep a supply of 'back-up' food (e.g. bread, fruit, cheese, etc) for any children who don't have enough food or are still hungry after eating everything in their lunchbox.
Guidance on food inclusions	• It is not the responsibility of ECEC staff to assess lunchboxes and identify if they are nutritionally adequate or not. • If families ask for support, appropriate guidance can be provided.	• Engage with an external dietitian to come into the service for an hour during 'pick-up time' to support families. • Create a booklet with photos of different lunchbox foods and recipes as ideas, provide to families at induction. • If families request support with nutritional balance, provide guidance on where to access information about balancing core food groups. • Provide a stand of lunchbox ideas with pictures or lunchbox food samples at drop-off or pick-up time.

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Safe eating (in the context of lunchboxes)

Foods that are known choking risks should not be included in lunchboxes. These include whole nuts, large or round pieces of hard fruits and vegetables such as whole grapes, cherry tomatoes and blueberries as well as raw pieces of carrot and celery sticks.

Key food safety lunchbox measures include:



Children and staff must wash their hands before eating, and when they have finished eating.



All children must always be seated and supervised when eating and drinking.



Children must not share food.



Clean up spills straight away.

Where there are children with food allergies attending the ECEC service:

- A food allergy aware approach is recommended rather than banning foods that children in the ECEC service are allergic to. To lower the chance of children with peanut, tree nut or egg allergies accidentally being exposed to their food allergen, services may ask that sticky foods like nut pastes and messy foods such as egg sandwiches are not included in children's lunchboxes.
- Each child's lunchbox must be clearly labelled with their name and a symbol that they can recognise. If they have a food allergy, ask families to write the child's food allergy on the label.
- Store lunchboxes belonging to children with food allergy separately, for example with their bag, or in a separate crate in the fridge, not with all the other lunchboxes. Have a system in place to check that children only eat from their own lunchbox.
- Make sure children with food allergy are not exposed to their food allergen by food spills from other children.

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