THE BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR
Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment

Strategies for Prioritising Minimally Processed Foods and Limiting Highly Processed Foods

The following strategies, together with common challenges and potential solutions, are designed to support your service to prioritise minimally processed foods while limiting highly processed foods.

Menu planning

Prioritise minimally processed foods when planning menus. Use whole foods from the five food groups.

Consider morning tea and afternoon tea as "mini meals" and therefore opportunities for additional servings of food from the five food groups. It is often at these meal opportunities that highly processed foods are served in ECEC.

Breakfast – in many services breakfast is available but not prepared or planned by the cook/chef. In some services this may lead to the use of highly processed cereals. In services that opt for breakfast cereals, look for minimally processed cereals with a short ingredient list e.g. oats, wheat biscuits, unsweetened shredded wheat, muesli.

Lunchbox services

As parents provide lunchboxes, it is not the service's responsibility, however some guidance/ ideas on type of foods that can be included in lunchboxes can be useful.

Quality improvement plan/policies and procedures

A clear, detailed, actionable policy/procedure statement on level of processing in meals can support the provision of minimally processed food.

Clear statements on celebration food or fundraising food can support reduction of highly processed food in the service.

⚠ **When implementing these strategies services should ensure they continue to meet the relevant food safety, food allergy and regulatory requirements.**

What is minimally processed food?

Minimally processed foods are whole foods from the five food groups – fruits, vegetables, whole grains, meat/ meat alternatives, and minimally processed dairy products or products that you can generally find in a kitchen. These can include:

- Fresh fruit and vegetables
- Eggs
- Fresh and frozen meat, poultry, fish
- Pasteurised milk and plain yoghurt
- Wholegrains – oats, brown rice
- Beans, lentils, chickpeas

What is processed food?

Whilst minimally processed foods should be prioritised, many foods are processed to improve their safety or shelf life. These foods can still be part of a nutritious diet. These can include:

- Tinned vegetables and beans
- Tinned fruit
- Tinned fish
- Cheese (traditional)
- Tofu
- Flour
- Tomato paste
- Vegetable oils e.g. olive oil

Highly processed food that should not be offered in ECEC

- Soft drinks and sugary beverages
- Commercial biscuits or cakes
- Highly processed meats or meat alternatives such as hot dogs/sausages, commercially made chicken/plant-based nuggets and processed lunch meats or meat alternatives
- Sweets/lollies
- Instant noodles/ instant soups
- Commercial baby biscuits, puffs, melt-in-the-mouth snacks

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NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS
QA1, QA2, QA5, QA6, QA7

This information has been sourced from the Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment.

Strategies for prioritising minimally processed foods and limiting highly processed foods

Strategies		Challenges/considerations	Potential solutions
Menu planning	Prioritise minimally processed foods when planning menus. Use whole foods from the five food groups.	Skills required for preparing meals from scratch.	Meals containing whole foods instead of highly processed options can include easy to prepare recipes such as stews and soups.
			Cooks completing training in meal planning and preparation can support the skills required to prepare meals from wholefood ingredients.
		Additional time required for preparing meals using whole foods.	Batch cooking and freezing foods (with food safety measures in place) can save on time.
	Consider morning tea and afternoon tea as "mini meals" and therefore opportunities for additional servings of food from the five food groups. It is often at these meal opportunities that highly processed foods are served in ECEC.	Time allocated to cooks for preparing morning tea and afternoon tea may be limited.	Easy-to-prepare options, such as fruits, vegetables sticks, dips, yoghurt or wholegrain toasts with avocado, hummus, and/or cheese are options that are quick to prepare but do not rely on highly processed, packaged foods.
	Breakfast – in many services breakfast is available but not prepared or planned by the cook/chef. In some services this may lead to the use of highly processed cereals. In services that opt for breakfast cereals, look for minimally processed cereals with a short ingredient list e.g. oats, wheat biscuits, unsweetened shredded wheat, muesli.	Limited time – especially if educators are caring for children at breakfast time and needing to prepare breakfast.	Quick and easy to prepare options such as whole grain toast with hummus, cheese, boiled eggs, pre-made frittata, yoghurt and muesli, oats, or minimally processed cereals can ensure that breakfasts not planned or prepared by cook can still be nutritious and minimally processed.
		⚠ **For regional/remote services** Access may be a major issue, particularly in remote areas where there may be lower access to fresh, whole foods and a higher reliance on highly processed and packaged foods due to shelf stability.	Preserving foods when they are available/in season. Education of kitchen staff and children (and families) into self-sufficiency is beneficial for remote communities and adds to improved health outcomes rather than overreliance on highly processed food. A view of "whose job/everyone's job" to preserve and store food can also help to avoid cook/chef burnout.
			Options for whole foods can include frozen or tinned versions.
		Space can be an issue – e.g. freezer space.	If freezer space is an issue, some inexpensive packaged, shelf-stable foods are not considered highly processed – for example brown rice, oats, lentils, beans.
		Inconsistency of supply – for example, a service orders certain foods and they are not delivered.	Develop flexible menus that can be adapted.
			Coordination with food suppliers may be needed.
Quality improvement plan/ policies and procedures	A clear, detailed, actionable policy/procedure statement on level of processing in meals can support the provision of minimally processed food.		
	Clear statements on celebration food or fundraising food can support reduction of highly processed food in the service.		
Lunchbox services	As parents provide lunchboxes, it is not the service's responsibility, however some guidance/ideas on type of foods that can be included in lunchboxes can be useful.	It may also be that a child from a food insecure home, or family situation that has limited preparation of fresh food, could have higher amounts of highly processed/ packaged food in their lunch box and it is important not to shame these children or their families.	
		It is very important not to shame children for lunchbox content. In addition, sending notes back to parents is not recommended.	
		Some children may have a strong need for consistency and familiarity with foods due to individual sensory needs, neurodivergence or other feeding considerations. For these children, processed or packaged foods may play an important role in providing predictable and familiar food options.	

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