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

Strategies to Provide a Variety of Plant-Based Foods

The following strategies, together with common considerations, challenges and potential solutions, are designed to support ECEC services to strengthen plant-based food provision through menu planning, food education, and practices that encourage children's acceptance of plant-based foods.

Food education

Food based experiences such as children chopping up their own vegetables.

When introducing more legumes to the menu, children can learn about legumes as part of food education – this can include simply talking about the food during the mealtime, or embedding plant-based foods into the curriculum.

Schedule a food-related excursion, such as a visit to a market or local farm.

Cooking experiences can focus on plant-based foods to increase children's exposure to these foods.

Involving children in gardening can encourage acceptance of plant-based food.

Lunchbox services

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

Menu planning

Ensure that plant-based foods are available at every eating occasion.

Plan menus to provide a variety of fruits, vegetables and wholegrains every day – including different types, colours and textures.

Plan morning tea and afternoon tea to contain vegetables, fruits and wholegrains.

On days when the main meal served is meat-free, prepare meals with plant-based protein (legumes and beans).

Add legumes to dips for morning tea and afternoon tea.

Legumes can be introduced by serving in combination with meat, for example a beef and lentil bolognese.

When introducing plant-based protein such as legumes, add familiar flavours and textures along with the legumes to encourage children's acceptance.

Mealtime practices

Educators can model the authentic enjoyment of plant-based food that they like to eat.

Engagement with children and families

Involve children in planning menus with a wide variety of plant-based foods.

When communicating with families about plant-based meals on the menu, simply use the language or name the food e.g., green curry, pumpkin risotto.

Quality improvement plan/policies and procedures

The service policy and procedures and quality improvement plan can ensure an emphasis on plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables, on the menu and throughout the curriculum.

Clear practice statements e.g. 'We serve one meat-free meal per week (rotated across different days) and these meals contain plant-based protein such as legumes/beans'.

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

Defining plant-based foods

Diets rich in plant-based foods can promote positive human and planetary health outcomes by providing essential nutrients that support wellbeing while having lower environmental impacts.

Plant-based foods include:

- **Fruits**
- **Vegetables**
- **Nuts**
- **Seeds**
- **Legumes** (e.g. beans, lentils, chickpeas)
- **Soy foods** (e.g. edamame, tempeh, tofu)
- **Wholegrains**

Plant-based food and ECEC Services

Research in Australian ECEC services suggests that plant-based foods such as vegetables and legumes are often not included regularly enough on service menus or in lunchboxes brought from home. ECEC services can provide opportunities to increase children's exposure to a variety of plant-based foods and foster curiosity and awareness of these foods across the service.

Key areas for plant-based foods in ECEC are in menu planning, food education, engagement with children and families, and the service's policy and procedure document or quality improvement plan. The acceptance of plant-based foods can also be supported through the mealtime environment and feeding practices during mealtimes.

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY | GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA | healthway

A project funded by Healthway and delivered by Edith Cowan University.

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

www.ecec-best-practice-guide.com.au

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

Strategies to provide a variety of plant-based foods in ECEC services

Strategies		Challenges/considerations	Potential solutions
Food education	Food based experiences such as children chopping up their own vegetables.	Safety concerns of using knives.	Use child-safe knives.
		Educator-children ratio.	Ensure sufficient supervision and appropriate educator-child ratio during activities requiring child-safe knives.
	When introducing more legumes to the menu, children can learn about legumes as part of food education – this can include simply talking about the food during the mealtime, or embedding plant-based foods into the curriculum.	Staff skills, experience and confidence in talking with children about food, delivering food education, and cooking activities with children may differ.	The Food Education module outlines a range of educational experiences to support this strategy.
	Schedule a food-related excursion, such as a visit to a market or local farm.		
	Cooking experiences can focus on plant-based foods to increase children's exposure to these foods.		
	Involving children in gardening can encourage acceptance of plant-based food.	Not all services can provide a garden.	
Menu planning	Ensure that plant-based foods are available at every eating occasion.	⚠ **For regional/remote services** Fresh produce may not always be available.	Dried/tinned legumes/beans can be purchased and are cost effective plant-based additions to menus.
			Frozen/tinned vegetables can be used in recipes.
	Plan menus to provide a variety of fruits, vegetables and wholegrains every day – including different types, colours and textures.	Lack of confidence/skills in preparing plant-based food.	Staff nutrition training and confidence in preparing plant-based food.
	Plan morning tea and afternoon tea to contain fruits, vegetables and wholegrains.	Children's taste preferences for plant-based foods.	Repeated exposure (therefore repeated opportunities) can support taste preferences.
	On days when the main meal served is meat-free, prepare meals with plant-based protein (legumes and beans).	Concern that plant-based food will be wasted.	Whole-of-service approaches to plant-based foods, which includes increased exposure, mealtime practice, food education and staff/family engagement, increases plant-based food intake without increasing food waste.
	Add legumes to dips for morning tea and afternoon tea.	Concern about costs.	Plant-based menus, especially using legumes, are cost effective.
	Legumes can be introduced by serving in combination with meat, for example a beef and lentil bolognese.	Additional time required for planning and preparing plant-based foods.	
	When introducing plant-based protein such as legumes, add familiar flavours and textures along with the legumes to encourage children's acceptance.		
Mealtime practices	Educators can model the authentic enjoyment of plant-based food that they like to eat.	Educators' food preferences may limit this.	
Quality improvement plan/ policies and procedures	The service policy and procedures and quality improvement plan can ensure an emphasis on plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables on the menu, and throughout the curriculum.	Policy/procedures may not match ability to source ingredients.	Dried/tinned legumes/beans can be purchased and are cost effective plant-based additions to menus. Frozen/ tinned vegetables can be used in recipes.
	Clear practice statements e.g. "We serve one meat-free meal per week (rotated across different days) and these meals contain plant-based protein such as legumes/ beans".		
Engagement with children and families	Involve children in planning menus with a wide variety of plant-based foods.		
	When communicating with families about plant-based meals on the menu, simply use the language or name the food e.g. green curry, pumpkin risotto.		
Lunchbox services	As parents provide lunchboxes, it is not the service's responsibility, however some guidance/ideas on types of foods that can be included in lunchboxes can be useful.	Families may not pack plant-based foods in lunchboxes.	
		It is very important not to shame children for lunchbox content. In addition, sending notes back to parents often backfires and is not recommended.	

A project funded by Healthway and delivered by Edith Cowan University.