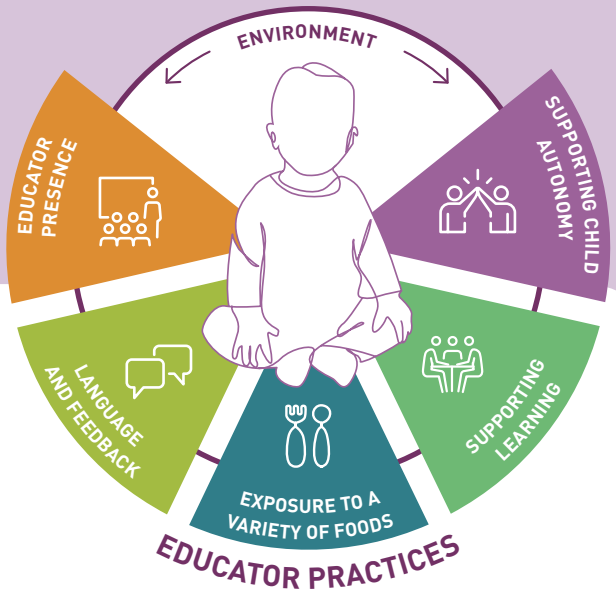
THE BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR
Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment

Appetite Regulation and Responsive Feeding

In ECEC settings, *how* a child is offered food is equally as important as *which foods* a child is served to eat. Offering food to a child involves caregivers responding to the child's individual needs.

Consistent, responsive interactions between a child and their caregiver in early life are crucial in shaping lifelong learning, behaviour, and health. Mealtimes provide a valuable opportunity for caregivers and children to engage in supportive, health-promoting interactions.



Responsive feeding strategies to adopt

There are key strategies that form part of a responsive feeding approach. The following strategies are how ECEC staff can support a responsive feeding approach in their service and during mealtimes.

EDUCATOR PRESENCE

Sit, be present and actively engage with children.

Model feelings of 'had enough' and hunger.

For example, "I'm noticing I've had enough; I'll eat again next time I'm hungry."

SUPPORTING CHILD AUTONOMY

Place food and beverages in common serving containers and allow children to serve themselves what and how much they would like to eat.

⚠ **Note:** this strategy is not suitable where there are children with food allergies, unless the food served is appropriate for all children with food allergies present at that mealtime.

Provide guided choices, but let children decide what and how much of the food offered they will consume.

For example, "Let's share these so that everyone who wants some can have some".

SUPPORTING LEARNING

Help children recognise their internal hunger and 'had enough' cues, for example, when a child is too busy to eat – help the child to recognise and name internal cues.

For example, "Looks like your tummy is saying 'all done'."

LANGUAGE AND FEEDBACK

Use specific, individualised feedback during mealtimes that focuses on what the child is doing, not on how much or what they eat.

For example, "I noticed you were eating so well with your spoon today", rather than "Good job for eating all of your broccoli".

Encourage rather than praise children when they try new foods or food that they dislike.

Comments should not be about the character of the child, but about the action.

ENVIRONMENT

Create a relaxed, enjoyable mealtime atmosphere and recognise that children eat at different speeds.

Many children benefit from mealtime structure and clear expectations; however, some children need a flexible approach and to be able to eat outside of usual mealtimes.

Things to avoid

Do not use food as a reward for behaviour; Avoid using foods to soothe children when they are upset.

Do not pressure children to eat.

Do not withdraw food from children or make judgements about food provided by families in lunchboxes.

Unless there are immediate safety concerns.

Reflective Questions for Educators

- *Think of a time when you felt that a child in your care did not eat enough food? How did you respond? Why? What actions could you take to strengthen your practice?*
- *What opportunities do you provide for children to enjoy food with all of their senses during mealtimes?*

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY
GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
healthway

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

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

Strategies for supporting responsive feeding

SUPPORTING LEARNING

Help children recognise their internal hunger and 'had enough' cues, for example, when a child is too busy to eat – help the child to recognise and name internal cues (for example, "Looks like your tummy is saying 'all done'. You listened well.").

- Respecting children's decisions (e.g. no requirements to finish their plate or try a new food).
- Invite children to pause and notice, e.g. "Let's listen to your body for a moment, does it feel like you need more, or is your tummy saying it's had enough?"
- Use simple, age-appropriate language to help children notice and name hunger and 'had enough' cues, that consider developmental differences.
- Recognising that some children will need to be emotionally regulated to be able to recognise and respond to these cues.
- Gently check in with busy children who want to return to play, supporting them to decide if their body needs more food or a break.
- Work with families to share similar language about hunger and 'had enough' cues across home and ECEC.

LANGUAGE AND FEEDBACK

Use specific, individualised feedback during mealtimes that focuses on what the child is doing, not on how much or what they eat. For example, "I noticed you were eating so well with your spoon today", rather than "Good job for eating all of your broccoli."

- Sit with children at mealtimes, be present, and actively engage in conversation while supervising.
- Plan routines to support uninterrupted mealtime presence of staff, especially when staffing is limited – e.g. family day care educators changing nappies before mealtimes so they can remain with children during mealtimes.

ENVIRONMENT

Create a relaxed, enjoyable mealtime atmosphere and recognise that children eat at different speeds.

- Children may eat at different speeds; some are slow, and some are fast.
- It is beneficial to create a relaxed mealtime, with safe access to sensory supports for those children who need them. The intent is not that every meal has to be 'enjoyable' or 'fun', rather mealtimes are a more relaxed and enjoyable experience when adults use responsive feeding practices and recognise and respond to child cues.

Many children benefit from mealtime structure and clear expectations; however, some children need a flexible approach and to be able to eat outside of usual mealtimes.

- Ensure water is always available.
- Allow time to transition so the mealtime is not rushed, and have predictable windows for eating.
- Expectations and routines are great and provide stability and security for many children, but all children may sometimes need a flexible approach for varying reasons.
- Work with individual care plans (e.g. medical, additional needs, trauma, or neurodivergence) where children may need more frequent or flexible access to food.
- Offer other early/late food options (e.g. fruit, vegetables, or milk) for children who are genuinely hungry outside the main eating window, so hunger is responded to.

Responsive feeding approach

Responsive feeding follows three steps:

1. **The child signals hunger or satiety** (the satisfied feeling when you have 'had enough' food or drink) through motor actions, facial expressions, or vocalisations.
2. **The caregiver recognises the cues and responds** promptly in a manner that is emotionally supportive, in response to the signal, and developmentally appropriate, e.g. helps the child access another helping if they are still hungry.
3. **The child experiences a predictable response** to signals. This last step is important for building trusting relationships as well as supporting individual cues. Responsive feeding may look different depending on the child's age, developmental stage and individual abilities.

Reflective Questions for Educators

- *What do responsive feeding practices currently look like in your service? What strategies are working well? What would you like to improve?*
- *How can you involve children in evaluating the success of mealtime practices? How can you include their voices?*

Reflective Question for Cooks

- *How does my menu planning and food service support responsive feeding strategies?*

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

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