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

Improving Your Recipes

The content below has been developed for cooks, by cooks, to support the menu planning process and help services meet the Australian Dietary Guideline recommendations by utilising the effective menu planning principles.



Supporting menu planning, assessment and review

To assist cooks with menu planning a variety of support services, online tools and resources have been developed. Some evidence suggests that the use of these supports can improve menu quality. Seeking menu planning support can also assist with meeting Regulations 79 (Service providing food and beverages) and 80 (Weekly menu) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations.

Individualised menu planning support

- A number of on-the-ground support services are available across each state and territory, delivered by dietitians, registered nutritionists, and health promotion officers.
- These services vary from being government-funded and freely available, to subscription or fee-based.
- Support provided varies from periodic menu reviews/assessments that include advice and recommendations (including understanding the number of food group serves being provided), advice and recommendations for specific issues, and training for cooks/chefs to build knowledge and confidence.

Online menu planning support

- Online tools are available whereby the person responsible for menu planning enters menu items/recipes into an online platform.
- Details such as the number of children being served are captured. The tool provides an overview of food groups provided, and compares this to the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* or local jurisdictional guidelines providing recommendations for menu improvement.

Online resources

- A variety of downloadable resources exist which aim to support menu planning.
- The information within these resources varies, but generally they provide information and recommendations on the amounts, varieties, and types of food and drinks that should be offered at ECEC.

⚠ **States and territories may set specific guidelines with accompanying documents. ECEC services should check what is available in their jurisdiction.**

Reviewing and improving recipes

HOW CAN RECIPES BE IMPROVED TO MEET CHILDREN'S NUTRITIONAL NEEDS?

By assessing recipes against the criteria listed below, small tweaks or major changes may become apparent which would help the recipe provide more serves of key food groups (e.g. lean meats, vegetables, etc), whilst also considering factors such as seasonality, cost, and variety.

To utilise the back of this poster, take a recipe from the standard menu, list the ingredients used (including quantities) and consider how each criterion (and related points) could be applied to your recipe.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Recipes that align with the Australian Dietary Guidelines directly impacts the nutritional quality of food children are provided whilst at ECEC. Providing enough variety and adequacy across the food groups ensures children receive key nutrients, crucial for their health and wellbeing. This also relates to Regulations 79 (Service providing food and beverages) and 80 (Weekly menu) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations.

Standardised recipes

A standardised recipe is a way of ensuring that each time a recipe is made, the exact same ingredients and methods are used – regardless of who is making the recipe or when. After developing a standardised recipe, ensure that this is followed precisely each and every time the recipe is made.

WHAT ELEMENTS MAKE UP A STANDARDISED RECIPE?

Generally, a standardised recipe includes the following elements:

- The recipe name
- The number of serves it makes (including the standard portion size and total yield)
- A list of ingredients (including brand, amount [quantity and unit])
  - For recipes made in bulk, different amounts can be listed for increasing number of portions
- Any common food allergens listed on the ingredient's packaging/ information sheet, as well as any listed in the precautionary allergen ('may contain') labelling
- Detailed, step-by-step methods/ procedure of how the recipe is made
- The number of serves provided in each food group (optional)
- Instructions for how the recipe is to be served (optional)
- Photos of the recipe at each step and as a final product (optional). Photos can be particularly helpful if specific textural requirements must be met.

A variety of downloadable standard recipe templates exist which aim to support menu planning. The elements within these templates vary, but generally they include the elements listed above. ECEC services should check what is available in their jurisdiction or nationally.

HOW STANDARDISED RECIPES SUPPORT EFFECTIVE MENU PLANNING?

Utilising a standardised recipe is considered best practice in food service settings, as it ensures consistency in nutritional contribution, food group balance, flavour, texture, portion size, ingredient sourcing, cost, and allergen content, regardless of who is cooking or when. Therefore, standard recipes are a key tool for protecting both the nutritional quality and the safety of meals across staff changes, busy days, and ingredient substitutions.

AFTER FINALISING THE RECIPE

Impact of the main meal on morning and afternoon tea

By beginning the menu planning process with the main meal (lunch) recipe, services can then determine which other foods to provide in the daily menu (e.g. morning tea and afternoon tea) to ensure children's food group recommendations in ECEC are being met.

Recipe and menu review

Finally, regular review of the menu (including recipes used) is a critical aspect of making sure that the food provided is meeting the expectations of the ECEC community.

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Utilising the key principles of effective menu planning

Australian Dietary Guideline adherence

Assessment

- Full menu compliance with guidelines is assessed across all food served throughout the day or week, rather than by individual recipes alone. However, checking if a recipe meets the recommended amounts from each food group provides an opportunity to understand which food groups may be missing, or may need to be provided more elsewhere.
- Attendance patterns can be used to ensure daily serve targets remain achievable across the occasions offered.
- Checking recipes against the Australian Dietary Guidelines can help to identify any discretionary foods or ingredients on the menu, and whether they can be reduced or swapped for a different option.

Portions/serve sizes

- Portions must consider the dietary needs for different age groups – generally, older children will require larger portions. Using standard sized serving equipment (e.g. scoop, ladle) ensures all portions are the same size and that every child will have enough, allowing extra to then be served for children that need it (e.g. older children or those that are still feeling hungry).

Food group guidance

- If using meat in a recipe, choose lean meats when possible.
- If swapping meat for plant-based alternatives (e.g. tofu, legumes, etc.), ensure there is enough alternative in each portion to allow a similar 'serve' of the food group. For example, half a serve of raw red meat is 50g, whereas half a serve of canned legumes is 75g, or 85g for tofu. More of the alternative is needed to create a similar 'half serve'.
- Replace 'white' grains (e.g. white bread, white rice, white flour, regular pasta) with brown or wholemeal options. Even replacing a portion of the grain with a wholegrain version can improve nutritional quality.

Food allergies

- When substituting ingredients due to surrounding considerations (e.g. guideline adherence, seasonality, etc), be aware of additional allergens introduced and update your food allergen menu matrix.
- Clearly list and identify all allergens present in ingredients when completing a standard recipe template (after utilising this section).

Seasonality

- Modify recipes to include seasonal fruits and vegetables.
- Frozen or canned vegetables can be used instead of fresh produce when seasonal ingredients are unavailable or too expensive.

Variety and balance

- Including a variety of food groups in a recipe ensures a balanced nutritional profile. Variety within a food group (e.g. multiple colours of vegetables) is also important.
- If possible, update the menu so that meals aren't repeated on the same day of each week (for example, rather than serving fish every Tuesday, change which day fish is served each time). This ensures children who attend part-time still receive a variety of options.
- Rice is a cost-effective grain but keep to the recommended portion as too many grain serves can displace vegetables and may reduce dietary variety. If reducing the amount of rice in a recipe, use any cost saving to increase vegetable content instead, such as adding frozen peas, canned corn, or seasonal cabbage.
- Check salt (sodium) content of flavourings, sauces, stock, canned goods, etc. as these are common high-salt foods, swap for 'low-salt' options.
- Cooking methods can impact the nutritional quality of meals – for example avoid deep frying.

Developmentally appropriate

Texture

- Check for foods that should be modified (e.g., texture) before they are given to infants and younger children.
- Select softer meat cuts for younger children (for example chicken thighs rather than breast).

Choking risk

- Ensure foods are prepared in a way that minimises risk of choking (e.g. carrots cooked or grated and grapes chopped lengthwise for infants and toddlers).

Foods to avoid for infants

- Choose ingredients with all children in mind (e.g. do not include honey if infants under 12 months will be eating).

Planning morning tea and afternoon tea around the main meal

Identify which food groups are not meeting recommendations (e.g. not included in the recipe, or included but not fully meeting recommendations) from the main meal (i.e. lunch) and use the morning and afternoon tea occasions strategically to fill this gap.

For example, if the recipe contains half the requirements of vegetables per child per day, another half serve of vegetables will be required during morning tea or afternoon tea.

Special dietary requirements

Cultural

- Ensure that ingredients are suitable for cultural or religious dietary requirements – confirm these with the families.
- Choose dishes that cater to a variety of cultural food traditions and flavour profiles.

Vegetarian/vegan

- Meat dishes can often be adapted by replacing the animal protein with firm tofu or legumes (e.g. chickpeas or lentils). Adjust quantities to ensure an equivalent serve is provided.
- Ensure that any sauces/flavourings used in the recipe are vegan-friendly by checking the label.

Facilities, equipment and storage needs

Consider storage facilities (e.g., freezer/ fridge space or availability) and adjust recipes accordingly.

Accessibility

- Avoid keeping large stockpiles unless reliable storage is available.
- Schedule vegetarian menu days to align with times when meat deliveries are unavailable.

Cost (budget driven adaptations)

- Some protein-rich food sources can be more expensive, such as chicken breast. Partially replacing the animal protein element with legumes (e.g. chickpeas, lentils) can reduce cost while maintaining protein content and increasing vegetable serves.
- Frozen or canned vegetables are cost-effective, nutritious alternatives to fresh produce, making them a reliable option when fresh produce is unavailable or costly.
- Compare the cost of buying fresh vegetables whole (cheaper than pre-cut) against the cost of time needed to cut them.

Reflective Questions for Educators

- *How well do we support cooks and food coordinators to undertake the complex responsibilities associated with menu planning, budgeting, food allergen management and food safety?*

Reflective Question for Cooks

- *When adapting recipes due to budget, seasonal availability, supply chain interruptions, cultural requirements or dietary needs, how do we ensure nutritional quality and food group balance are maintained?*

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