CASE STUDY

Mealtime rituals

A celebration of families and diverse mealtime practices

SERVICE	School of Early Learning West Leederville
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	6 months to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	160
NUMBER OF STAFF	39
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Perth, WA



Background

The School of Early Learning (SOEL) West Leederville is a large service with 160 places across 2 floors. Due to size of SOEL services, staff saw that it was important to intentionally build a sense of belonging and community for all children and families who attend. As part of these efforts, all SOEL services decided to focus on moving from routines to rituals in the baby and toddler age groups, and that included in the mealtime space.

Part of SOEL's ongoing professional learning involves staff from each room having a research focus, and over the past few years, transforming routines into rituals has been the dominant idea. Educators had begun learning about the importance of rituals in the ECEC space and wanted to start something to share mealtime rituals at SOEL, showcase to parents the rituals at the centre and learn about the children's rituals at home.

They began a collaborative book showcasing mealtime rituals at the centre. It was then sent home with families who filled it with their special mealtime rituals from home, which are then shared, celebrated and sometimes even incorporated into mealtimes at the centre.

What did you want to do?

- Communicate with families:
  - Share what they were doing in the service with families.
  - Increase communication with families.
  - Communicate a shared intention – meaningful rituals at mealtimes.
- Build community:
  - The overall goal was to bring everyone together by showing that everyone does things a bit differently, and celebrate these differences.
  - They also wanted something that could be interactive for families.
  - The Mealtimes Rituals book felt like the perfect way to do this.

What did you do?

Making the Mealtimes Rituals book

- They started the book by writing the rituals they did at the service during mealtimes across the day.
  - They used a simple, 120-page, A4 exercise book.
  - The older children created the cover page.
  - There is a sewing club in the older rooms, and children were asked to sew pictures onto a calico bag that would protect the book when it was sent home.
  - The front of the book contained a thank you to the sewing club children.
  - The first pages of the book contained information on rituals, the intention of the book and how to fill it out.

Using the Mealtimes Rituals book

- The book then started to be sent home, with families taking photos of their mealtimes rituals at home and decorating the pages with photos and pictures.
  - Parents could also email photos to the centre to print out if they weren't able to do it themselves.
  - Each child and family had their own page to fill out.
- Families then bring the book back and educators shared the mealtime ritual with the children, and even occasionally incorporated it into the centre's rituals.

What happens to the book when the children leave SOEL?

- When the children have finished at the centre, the books will be archived for a few years to document SOEL's work in this space.
  - Books that speak most loudly about the heart of SOEL will be kept and archived.
  - They will be converted to PDF and any faces blurred if necessary for privacy and anonymity.

The difference it has made

For educators and practice

- The addition of the mealtime rituals book has given educators the opportunity to add depth to their everyday experiences via incorporating practices from the children's homes:
  - Educators are able to highlight treasured moments in the lives of families at the service.
  - Educators use the book throughout mealtimes to slow down the centre's own mealtime rituals.
  - The book has also been a useful tool at the centre – they have found that when seeking ways to further support a child's mealtime experience, they can explore the child's individual mealtime ritual and draw on this knowledge to identify strategies that help the child feel settled and supported during mealtimes at the service.
- Staff have also seen that there is an opportunity to build upon this work by including rituals from other parts of the day.

For families

- They have had positive feedback from parents, with families eager to have a turn to add their mealtime rituals to the book.
- Families are able to see what others are doing during mealtimes at home, and learn from each other.

Top tips

- Start with 2-3 books so that if one book is out with a family, you can still work and teach from another book.
- Be clear on rules for adding photos to the book.
  - Consider advising families to avoid adding children's faces as the book will be sent home to different households and will be seen by people outside of the centre.
- If they had their time again, they would make the book more child-focussed than parent-focussed to encourage more involvement, especially from the older children.
- Some families can get really competitive about their page in the book!
  - Encourage families not to lose sight of the purpose of their entry.
  - Emphasise that the intent of the contribution is what is important (connection, conversation and experience), rather than how magnificent it looks.

The staff at SOEL West Leederville hope that the Mealtime Rituals book will be a living document that grows with the children, documenting the development of their mealtime rituals over time.

The book has been a wonderful way for SOEL West Leederville to create a welcoming community, where all children and families are celebrated and can feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

