CASE STUDY

The Pom Pom Café

A place for community, connection, learning and celebration

SERVICE	C&K Tully Community Kindergarten
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	Lunchbox service
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, not-for-profit
AGE RANGE	3 to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	66
NUMBER OF STAFF	6
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Outer regional

LOCATION

Tully, Queensland



Background

C&K Tully is a private, not-for-profit service, located in outer regional QLD. The service is licensed for 66 children over three rooms. It caters to children three to five years of age. Parents provide lunchboxes for the children's meals throughout the day. Currently the service employs 6 staff who make up the team. Their educational philosophy is grounded in the Reggio Emilia approach and has a focus on child-led and child-centred learning. The service is nature-based, with most of the day spent outdoors, has inclusivity and kindness at its core, and slow and flexible routines shape the day. They opened the Pom Pom Café in 2023 and have found it to be an amazing place for community connection, co-developing extended learning opportunities with the children and exploring and celebrating cultural diversity.

What did you want to do?

Through professional learning, staff were made aware that throughout the day there were plenty of positive interactions between staff and children, but mealtimes were an area that required support to increase these positive interactions. Staff wanted to find a way to make mealtimes:

- Less rushed.
- Less about directing and correcting.
- More about children enjoying meals when they felt hungry and eating at their own pace.
- More about having meaningful conversations at mealtimes that build oral communication skills, and build connections between people.

What did you do?

C&K Tully has received Uplift funding from the Queensland Government every year for the last four years. Uplift funding is designated to each service based on levels of socio-economic disadvantage and developmental vulnerability of the children and the services.

Services educating more children in areas of higher socio-economic disadvantage and who are developmentally vulnerable receive more funding to address developmental needs and decrease inequities caused by disadvantage.

- This funding has allowed staff to:
  - Engage in professional learning with educational consultants to improve their practice, for example in interactions with children during mealtimes.
  - Work with consultants to rethink and redesign how the service functions and works with children.
- Through working with consultants, discussion with parents, and a lot of critical reflection, the service decided to:
  - Start small with progressive morning and afternoon tea times (3-week trial).
  - Later move to progressive mealtimes (3-week trial).
  - Eventually the idea of the Pom Pom Cafe was born to incorporate progressive mealtimes, their outdoor environment, and support child agency in deciding when to eat.

Addressing parent concerns

There was some parent concern when progressive morning and afternoon tea were trialled. To address this concern, C&K Tully implemented processes during the trial period which have continued on to be used in the café:

Parent concern	Solution
Children who hadn't eaten would be overlooked and go hungry	A daily checklist of children's names to be marked off when they have eaten and record parent requests.
Parent wishes would not be accommodated in relation to mealtimes	A daily checklist of children's names to be marked off when they have eaten and record parent requests. Have a staff member present in the café throughout the day to speak with children and also supervise, monitor and record eating.
Children couldn't tell when they were hungry	Educators model listening to body messages throughout the day e.g. My tummy is grumbling – that means I might be hungry. I think I need something to eat. Posters are also placed around the play area to support children in tuning into their hunger and 'had enough' signals. Staff point to and discuss these throughout the day to remind children to tune into their body and then decide if they would like to go and eat.
Children who don't want to stop playing will never come and eat	Through building strong relationships with children, educators know which children may not want to stop playing in order to eat, so will give these children extra reminders.

Setup of the Pom Pom Café

- Located outdoors.
- Set up like a café – tables and chairs, tablecloths, decorative plants.
- Parents can come in and eat with their children at the café – this helps to build community connection.
- Has a closing time at 1pm to allow time to pack away.

What about hand hygiene?

- They have installed a handwashing station with individual towels in a bucket.
  - It takes 2 people to operate, so requires communication and teamwork.
  - To get the towels, the children practice their pincer grip and pinch the clean towel out of the clean bucket, then drop it into the used bucket.
- In the future, the centre will be getting a new handwashing station made by the men at the local Men's Shed.
  - This will be building on an existing community partnership with this Men's Shed where they have been fixing the centre's toy diggers for free.
  - The Men's Shed is keen to make the new handwashing station, that they will cost for the centre.
  - Funds for the handwashing station will be taken from those fundraised by C&K Tully's Community Advisory Group.
  - This act shows a commitment to keeping the cycle of community connectedness going at C&K Tully.

Is it easy to clean?

- Tablecloths:
  - Started with plastic tablecloths that are easy to wipe down.
  - Moved to cloth for a trial, and it was successful, however concerns remained about the risk of cross-contamination for children with allergies.
  - Solution – on days when children with food allergies attend, plastic tablecloths are still used as they can be cleaned more thoroughly between 'customers'.
- General cleaning:
  - With educator supervision, children are involved in cleaning up after they eat.
  - The centre provides child-sized equipment to encourage participation.
  - The idea is to develop independence, but also to build consideration of others by leaving the café tidy for the next visitors.
  - As the café is outside, staff can hose down the tables and floor at the end of the day as well.

What about supervision?

- The café is located in a part of the outside play area that allows the supervising educator to see the whole of the yard.
- There is another staff member out in the yard as well.
- Ratios are maintained at all times.
- Only 4-6 children come through the café at a time, and this also helps with supervision of eating and prevention of cross-contamination.

How did you name the café?

The children named it! It is located outside on the veranda, right under a big tree that has red flowers that look like pom poms! So, the children thought that would be the perfect name for the café.

The difference it has made

Conversations and connection

- The café has become a hub for learning about children's personalities, concerns, ideas.
  - It is a safe space for children to "unpack things they are worried about" and discuss what is happening in their lives – it's not all about the food, it's also about family and community connection.
- Has allowed for better quality conversations, and exploration of new topics with children as there is no need to rush. This is facilitated by the Chat Box:
  - A little box with questions in it that can be used as conversation starters.
  - This is kept in the café all the time.
  - The staff have noticed that children experiencing trauma tend to gravitate more towards the imaginative questions, so this is an important way for these children to relax, feel safe, be creative and build connections with staff and other children in a way that does not put pressure on them to think of things to say.
- Has helped to lower stress for both educators and children.
- Helps build children's language skills.
- Increases positive staff-child interactions.

Food exploration, extended learning and sensory support

- Has helped children explore new foods in a quiet, comfortable and safe environment.
  - This also supports children's foundational learning in health.
- Has led to extended experiences based on the seasons, like:
  - Bird watching – have added a bird watching book and identifying birds in the garden.
  - Cultural understanding and geography – have added a flag book and children identify which flags belong to which people in the service.
  - Looking at bugs and insects that are around and learning about them.
- The café has now expanded to the Pom Pom Lounge that is a soft place to rest outside.
  - It contains a large fish tank with fairies and books called Pom Pom Fairy World.
  - This space is perfect for a break from the playground, without having to move back inside – a gap recognised by staff through careful observation.
  - Can be used by all children, especially those who may have sensory needs, trauma, or are just tired and need a break.

What next?

Next, they may create some chat box cards that only have pictures and allow children to create a story from the pictures – this is especially useful for children who aren't yet reading.

Top tips

- "You don't need funds to start it, just the courage to jump".
- You will be "astounded by how competent and capable children are".
- Start with a trial.
- Begin with a checklist to mark off who has eaten and include parental requests, etc from the start.
- Include parent, staff and child feedback in the process.
- There will be bumps, but it is definitely worth trying this kind of system for mealtimes – "everyone loves it!"