CASE STUDY

Nourishing Little Minds® in ECEC

A positive food exposure program for ECEC, co-developed with the sector

ORGANISATION	Nutrition Australia ACT
ORGANISATION TYPE	Community nutrition organisation
BUSINESS MODEL	Not-for-profit
NUMBER OF ECEC SERVICES REACHED	79
NUMBER OF STAFF REACHED	1,075
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Australian Capital Territory



Background

Nourishing LittleMinds® in ECEC (NLMECEC) is a program that delivers professional development for ECEC educators in long day care and family day care. Aligned with the EYLF, NLMECEC combines early childhood literacy with experiential play-based learning to enrich children's awareness, interest, enjoyment, and exposure to a variety of foods. The program was developed in consultation with the ECEC sector to be relevant, useable, and to help ECEC staff and children build confidence around talking about and exploring different foods.

What did you want to do?

- Support educators to apply a non-food approach to positive food exposure, with a particular emphasis on vegetables, that increases children's curiosity and internal motivation to enjoy these foods:
  - Reduce food neophobia by helping children learn about new foods in a safe and supportive way.
  - Provide children with positive experiences with food via non-food methods.
  - Use engaging food-related activities that pique children's interest and curiosity.
  - Make experiences play-based.
- Upskill ECEC educators with knowledge, skills, and confidence to embed regular food-related activities into centre programming.

What did you do?

Program design

Initial engagement of an expert steering group to ensure the ECEC perspective was central to program development. Advisory Group members were:

- Directors from local ECEC services.
- Children's Education and Care Assurance, ACT Education Directorate.
- Early Childhood Australia representative.

The Advisory Group's role was to guide and advise on program development, ensuring alignment with the EYLF.

The program was designed as educator professional learning, with development of an associated educator manual containing the following sections:

- Learning activities – 13 learning activities each comprising:
  - Links to the EYLF.
  - Instructions on delivering the activity.
  - Relevant associated resources such as literature or templates.
  - Reflection questions for children.
- Book ideas – curated list of children's literature with positive food-related themes.
- Songs and rhymes – curated list of food-related songs and rhymes.
- Food preparation activities – food preparation tips including six basic recipes with educator guide and take-home recipes.

- Family information fact sheets aligned with responsive feeding practices.
- Templates for use in learning activities.
- Links to further resources.

Program pilot

- A grant was procured from ACT Health to fund the development of the project.
- Recruited 79 long day care services in the ACT to pilot the program. Services were engaged through ACT ECEC newsletter mailing list. Invitations to participate were sent out via this list.

Each participating ECEC Service received:

- A two-hour, face to face educator PD session held after hours at the service.
  - This ensured maximum participation.
- A printed Educator Manual with a suite of activities that had been pilot tested previously.
  - These activities were created in collaboration with the project's Steering Group.
  - All of the activities were linked across each of the five Learning Outcomes of the EYLF.
- Resource tub comprising:
  - 12 selected children's storybooks that were most commonly referred to in the Educator Manual.
  - Set of laminated templates from the Educator Manual.
  - Crafting materials (felt, stickers and paddle pop sticks) for group crafting activities during the PD session
- The PD sessions:
  - Focussed on how educators can facilitate play-based food exposure opportunities for children in non-food ways.
  - Allowed time for ECEC educators to brainstorm how they might utilise the resources in their centre and customise them to their needs.
  - Addressed positive language and role modelling around food.

It wasn't nutrition education – it was activities that linked to the EYLF that:

- Exposed children to different foods, vegetables especially, through books, songs, activities and games.
- Brought in elements of food, without it being about playing with or tasting food – e.g. instead of playing Duck, Duck, Goose, we would suggest Carrot, Carrot, Tomato.

Cost

The pilot program was delivered free as it was funded by the ACT Government under the ACT Health, Healthy Canberra Grants Program. Now it is a fee-for-service program.

The educator manual is available online for Nutrition Australia ECEC Food Foundations subscribers.

The difference it has made

After the delivery of NLMECEC to ECEC staff, ECEC directors were contacted for feedback on how the program was running.

After three months:

- Most directors said they loved the training.
- Directors reported that the program was engaging and fun.
- Directors said it gave them agency to follow up activities on the floor.
- There was a positive shift in educators supporting children's curiosity and engagement with food.
- More cooking activities were happening.

After six months, directors reported they were:

- Still positive about the program.
- Still using the books.
- Noticed educators talking positively around mealtimes.
- The program had been effective in increasing children's positive relationship with food.
- Children were more interested at mealtimes.
- The books and activities helped.

NLMECEC empowered educators to:

- Use the resources and create even more ideas from it.
- Feel they could guide some of these activities and tailor them to their service's needs.
- Increase confidence in how they talk to children about food and implement activities.

Top tips

- ECEC staff are the experts in working with children in the early years of life. It is important to engage with them and get their input to:
  - Ensure the resource is relevant and useful.
  - Learn how to connect with services in the ways that suit them.
  - Ensure activities are developmentally appropriate and feasible within an ECEC setting.
- When conducting face-to-face interactive PD sessions, cap groups at 20 people per session.
- Have a follow up session every year to teach new staff and to reinforce messages with those who have already done the course.