Talking About Food, Bodies and Eating

Early childhood services and staff often think carefully about the words they use around food, eating and bodies. Young children pick up on this language, which can shape how they feel about themselves and food for years to come.



The section below explains some of the language your child's service may use and why. Some families may want to use this language at home too. Others may find parts of it don't fit for their family. Both are OK.

Food explorers, not fussy eaters

Most children between one and five go through phases where they may prefer familiar foods, refuse new ones, or have strong opinions about what's on their plate. This is a normal part of learning about food.

Instead of describing children as 'picky' or 'fussy', ECEC services may use the term 'food explorer'. This wording recognises that every child has their own pace when it comes to trying something new.

YOU MIGHT HEAR AN EDUCATOR SAY

"They're still exploring that food"

rather than

"They don't like it"

AT HOME

You may find it helpful to describe your child's eating this way too.

'Good eater' and praise

Adults often praise children for trying new foods, eating a full meal or finishing their plate. This usually comes from a caring place. However, this can lead some children to start focusing on pleasing adults rather than listening to their own hunger and fullness. Over time, this can make it harder for a child to know when they've had enough.

ECEC staff may avoid making comments on how much a child ate. Instead, they might comment on the skills involved.

YOU MIGHT HEAR AN EDUCATOR SAY

"You balanced those peas on your spoon so well"

rather than

"Good job for eating all your broccoli"

AT HOME

You might find it helps to focus on what your child is doing, rather than on the food itself.

You might also find making changes like this takes a bit of practice, and that's OK.

Talking about bodies

Children start noticing body shape and size from around preschool age. Research shows some children as young as three worry about their body image.

ECEC staff may avoid commenting on a child's body size or shape, including affectionate terms. Instead, they may talk about what bodies can do.

YOU MIGHT HEAR AN EDUCATOR SAY

"Our bodies help us run, climb and play"

instead of focusing on appearance.

You might also hear them redirect conversations if children or other adults start talking about a person's body, even if it is meant in a kind way.

AT HOME

Families make their own decisions about how they talk about bodies. This can be shaped by culture, family history and other things.

If you want to try matching the way your ECEC does this, try focusing conversations on what bodies do rather than how they look, and avoid commenting on your own body or other people's bodies in front of children.

All foods fit

Words such as 'unhealthy' or 'fattening' are often used in well-intended ways. People may think that describing foods in this way helps children make healthier choices. However, hearing this language can lead children to associate food with guilt, fear or shame.

ECEC services may steer away from this kind of language and instead describe food in neutral terms. This includes calling food by its name (e.g. apple, bread, cheese, cake) or focusing on things like taste, texture or how a food makes you feel.

YOU MIGHT HEAR AN EDUCATOR SAY

"Let's sort these foods into crunchy and soft"

or

"Let's find out how these tomatoes grow"

or

"Which one is your favourite fruit?"

AT HOME

You still get to choose which foods you provide to your child. You might like to try asking them about how they experience food, e.g. "Do you think this soup is creamy or lumpy?" or "Do you like smooth or crunchy peanut butter better?"

If you have questions or concerns

If you've noticed your child showing distress, fear or discomfort around food, or you have any concerns about their eating, growth or development, you can discuss these concerns with your GP, child health nurse or a paediatric dietitian.

Educators can't diagnose or treat feeding or eating difficulties, but they can share what they've noticed at the service and work alongside you and your health provider to support your child's feeding and eating while at the service.

Support if you need it

If you'd like to talk to someone about your own or your child's relationship with food or body image, the Butterfly National Helpline is available seven days a week, 8 am to midnight (AEST/AEDT), on 1800 33 4673, or via webchat or email at butterfly.org.au.

The National Eating Disorders Collaboration website has resources to support families to adopt 'Eating Disorder Safe' aligned approaches at home : www.nedc.com.au

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