



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

Mealtime Environment and Practices

MODULE 1



The Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment

Module 1: Mealtime Environment and Practices

This Mealtime Environment and Practices (MEP) module is one of a series within *The Best Practice Guide (BPG) for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Food Environment, birth to 5 years*. The MEP module provides practical, evidence-informed guidance aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) v2.0 and the National Quality Standard.

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands on which this guide was created across Australia, and recognise and respect the significance of their communities, cultures and histories.

Foreword

'Nurturing Healthy Futures Best Practice Guide' – launching September 2026

Early childhood is a powerful window for shaping lifelong relationships with food, health, and community. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services play an essential role in nurturing these foundations – not only by providing meals, but by creating environments where children feel safe, included, curious, and connected. The 'Nurturing Healthy Futures Best Practice Guide' has been developed to support this vital work.

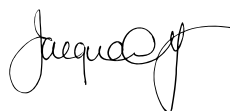
This guide brings together practical, evidence based strategies to help ECEC services reflect and enhance the food environments they offer across metropolitan, regional, and remote communities. Funded by Healthway and delivered by Edith Cowan University, it reflects extensive consultation, research, and collaboration with educators, health professionals, families, and community partners. The result is a resource designed to be both aspirational and achievable – supporting services to embed nourishing, culturally responsive, and sustainable practices in their everyday routines.

The guide is organised into a set of interconnected modules that together form a holistic approach to food provision and learning in ECEC. It provides practical guidance on everyday mealtimes practices, menu planning and meal quality, food safety, and food education, alongside strategies to strengthen partnerships with families and embed best practice into service-wide systems to support consistency, sustainability, and long-term impact.

Together, these modules acknowledge that safe and supportive food environments are not created through single actions, but through everyday choices, relationships, and shared commitments. They recognise the diversity of communities in Australia and the importance of culturally safe, inclusive approaches that honour children's identities and family traditions.

By adopting the practices outlined in this Guide, ECEC services can help build strong foundations for lifelong wellbeing for young children – supporting them to thrive physically, socially, and emotionally.

I hope this resource empowers educators and leaders to continue building safe and supportive food environments where every child feels included and respected, and where everyday food experiences support connection and nourishment. By noticing and responding to children's cues and partnering with families, services can support children's wellbeing as they grow and learn.



Dr Jacqueline McGowan-Jones

Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA)

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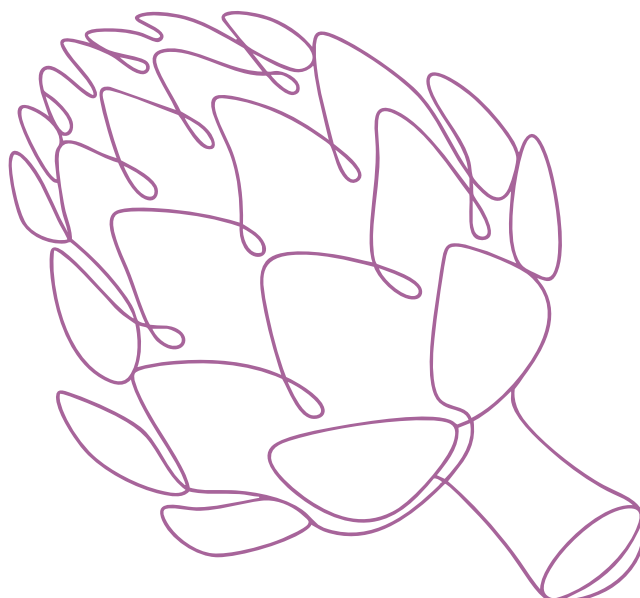
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Background

Mealtimes in early learning settings are more than a routine to help children eat. They are important opportunities for connection, learning and development, and for supporting children's confidence and comfort around food and eating. At the same time, services must balance safety, regulatory requirements, diverse developmental and cultural needs, family expectations and practical constraints such as time and staffing.

The Mealtime Environment and Practices (MEP) module has been developed to support Early Childhood Education and Care settings (ECEC), for children from birth to 5 years, to create mealtimes that are safe, calm, inclusive and responsive to each child, while reflecting current evidence and the needs of the sector.

This module aims to:

- Provide ECEC services guidance on safety standards in mealtime environments and practices, and support ECEC services to ensure food safety standards in mealtime environments and practices.
- Shift the focus of mealtimes from a care routine to a space and time for learning and development.
- To support ECEC staff to understand children's developmental pathways and adapt mealtime routines and environments to reflect each child's readiness, preferences, and way of engaging with food.
- Provide support to educators and services on how to encourage self-regulation in eating.
- Provide a Best Practice Guide based on current evidence and current needs of the ECEC sector and supporting the public health sector.
- Provide recommendations that are informed by an understanding of child development, and the impact of anxiety on food preferences and eating skills for a variety of reasons, including food allergy, trauma, neurodivergence, and disabilities.

The sections below outline why this guide was developed, how it connects to the Artichoke Model and who it is designed for.

Why this guide was developed

Many Australian children spend long hours attending ECEC each week. In June 2025, 901,050 Australian children attended ECEC.³ Children spend on average four full days per week (34 hours) in centre-based care and three full days per week (26 hours) in family day care. In these settings, they share food with their peers and receive support from educators. Within these settings, food and mealtimes feature across the whole day: during planned meals, in conversations with families about what children are and aren't eating, and in everyday teaching and play experiences. This creates daily opportunities for connection, co-regulation and children's self-regulation in eating, as well as for learning and development.

The MEP module was developed to support ECEC staff to build their awareness, confidence and practical skills in these areas. It is designed to help services create mealtimes that are safe, inclusive and responsive to each child, and to support a whole-of-service approach to the food environment in early learning settings.

The MEP module sits within the Artichoke Model (Figure 1), which guides the overall structure for this Best Practice Guide.

What is the Artichoke Model?

The Artichoke Model: ECEC Food Environment Model⁴ is a visual way of looking at the whole food environment in early learning settings.

Like the layers of an artichoke, the model places children's everyday food experiences at ECEC, surrounded by the people, places, systems and routines that shape those experiences. Each 'leaf' represents a key area of the food environment, and together they show how everyday practices, relationships, curriculum, policies and service systems all work together.

Where did it come from?

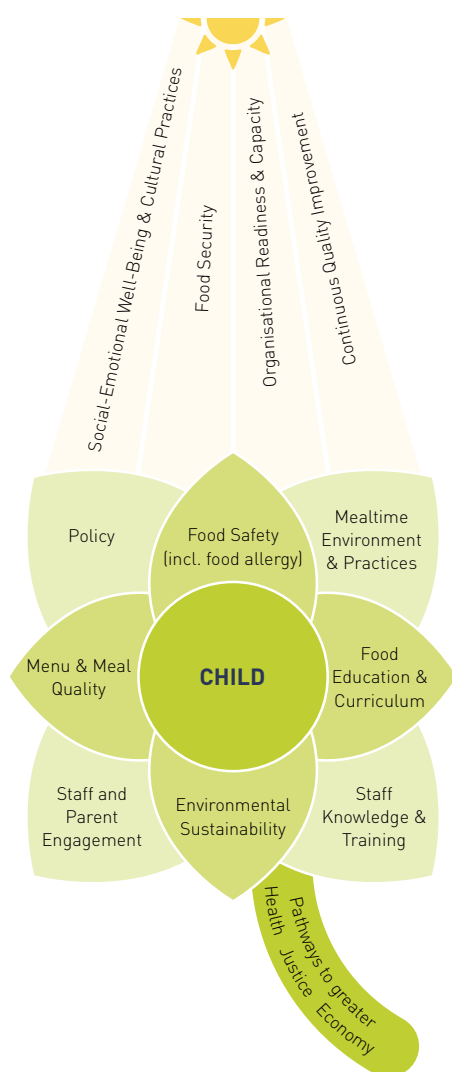
The Artichoke Model was co-designed in 2024 by members of the National Nutrition Network-ECEC, drawing on their collective experience as researchers, practitioners and policymakers.⁴ Through collaborative discussion and visual mapping, the group identified the key components of food environments, creating a simple, sector-owned way of mapping the ECEC food environment that feels recognisable to services and usable in day-to-day practice.

What does it include and why?

The Artichoke Model maps **12 connected 'leaves'** across the ECEC food environment, grouped into three layers:

- **What – food provided** (for example: Menu and Meal Quality, Food Safety and Food Allergen Management, Food Education and Curriculum, Environmental Sustainability)
- **How – feeding practices and support** (for example: Mealtime Environment and Practices, Staff Knowledge and Training, Staff and Family Engagement, Policy)
- **Environmental levers – service conditions that shape what's possible** (for example: Social-emotional wellbeing and Cultural Practices, Food Security of the ECEC service, Organisational Readiness and Capacity, Continuous Quality Improvement).

FIGURE 1: *The Artichoke Model*



Each leaf includes practical topics and reflection questions that services can use to think about where food and mealtimes already work well, where children might need something different, and what the next small step for improvement could be.

This Best Practice Guide builds on the Artichoke Model. The project team used the 12 'leaves' to scope and streamline key themes and sub-topics, then developed modules that turn the high-level map into practical recommendations, examples and tools for services. Each module zooms in on one or more parts of the Artichoke Model while still keeping sight of the whole service.

What does the Artichoke Model mean for MEP?

Within the Artichoke Model, MEP sits mainly in the 'How – feeding practices and support' layer, with links to the 'what' and 'environmental levers' leaves. For MEP, the Artichoke Model reminds us that great mealtimes don't happen by accident; they are part of how the whole service works, with the child at the heart of everyday decisions and routines.

The MEP module turns this part of the model into day-to-day practice guidance, focusing on *how meals happen*: the routines, interactions, environments and simple set-ups that help children feel safe, included and curious confident, child-centred mealtimes.

Scope of the Mealtime Environment and Practices (MEP) module

The MEP module focuses on:

- Everyday mealtimes that occur within ECEC services for children from birth to five years.
- How educators, cooks/chefs, and service leaders plan, organise and facilitate mealtimes.
- The social, emotional, sensory and cultural aspects of mealtimes.
- Interactions between children and educators, amongst children, and amongst adults during mealtimes.
- Co-regulation and appetite self-regulation in the context of typical ECEC practice.

What is not included?

This module does not:

- Provide detailed guidance on menu planning, nutrient analysis or specific food-based recommendations (these are covered in the Menu and Meal Quality module).
- Replace clinical assessment, diagnosis or treatment for feeding, eating or growth concerns.
- Provide protocols for specialist feeding therapy or oral-motor interventions.
- Override existing legislation, regulations, or individual healthcare/action plans for children.
- Focus on outside school hours care (OSHC) or home mealtimes, although some principles may still be useful in those settings.

ECEC staff and services should use this module alongside relevant regulations, service policies and any clinical advice for individual children.

Acknowledgements

This Mealtime Environment and Practices (MEP) module was developed through a strong, collaborative co-design process. For the purposes of citation and attribution, members of the Best Practice Guide Project Team, the Mealtime Environment and Practices Working Group and Best Practice Guide Advisory Group, together with those acknowledged under Workshop Development and Facilitation, Meetings Chair, and Additional Consultation, are collectively recognised as the Mealtime Environment and Practices Consortium. Contributions across the Consortium varied according to individual expertise and involvement and included Conceptualisation, Writing: original draft, and Writing: review and editing, as applicable to each contributor's role.

We sincerely thank the individuals and organisations represented across the Consortium for the breadth and depth of expertise they brought across early learning practice, nutrition and dietetics, public health, government, regulation, peak bodies, training, and service delivery. Their generous time, practical insights, and commitment to improving food environments in early learning settings have directly strengthened the relevance, feasibility, and quality of this guidance.

We are especially grateful to the educators, service leaders, cooks, and chefs in early childhood services across Australia who shared their time, everyday experiences, and honest insights during development. Their knowledge grounded this Guide in real practice and reminded us throughout what truly matters at mealtimes.

We acknowledge the National Nutrition Network for Early Childhood Education and Care (NNN-ECEC) for their foundational role in developing the Artichoke Model and for their sustained commitment to improving food environments for young children across Australia.

Mealtime Environment and Practices Working Group

Our Working Group (listed alphabetically) brought together experts in nutrition and dietetics, occupational therapy, trauma-aware and inclusive practice, shared mealtimes, food allergy management and service leadership to shape the Mealtime Environment and Practices module.

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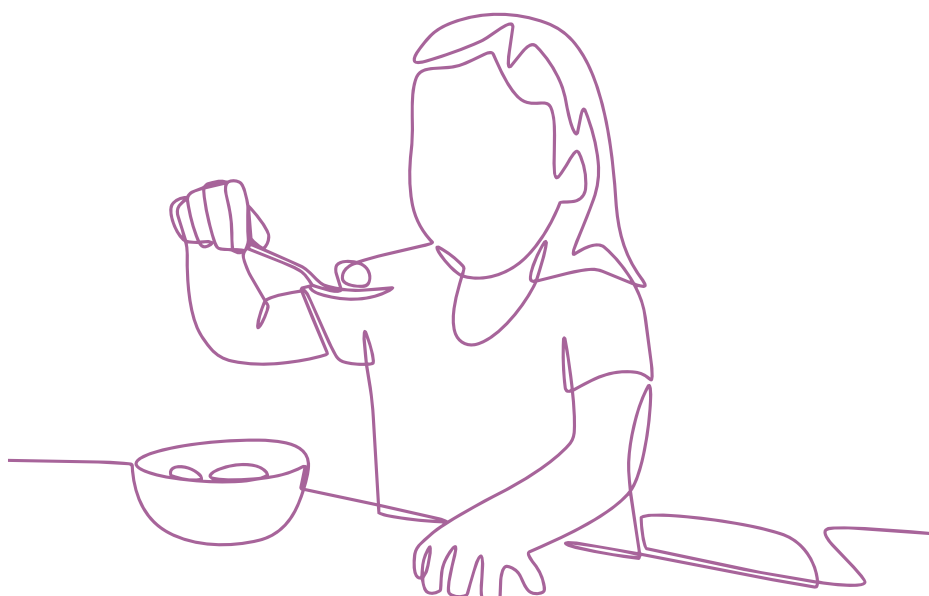
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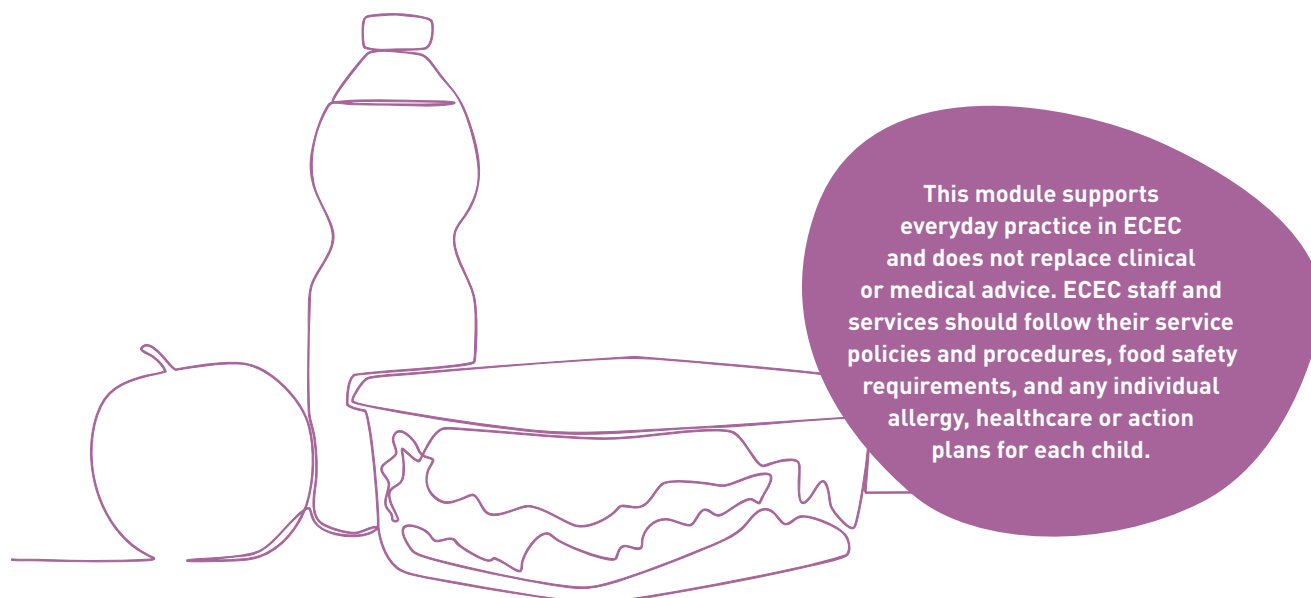


Who this module is for

The MEP module is for people working in ECEC services for children from birth to five years. The module applies across centre-based care and family day care, and is relevant whether food is provided by the service, brought from home, or a mix of both. Table 1 suggests how this module can be utilised for each target audience:

TABLE 1: *Intended users and use of the Mealtime Environment and Practices Module*

Intended users	How they can use this module
Educators and room leaders (including relief and casual staff)	To guide everyday mealtime routines and set-ups, support children's participation and self-regulation, and reflect on mealtime practices as part of ongoing quality improvement.
Service leaders/directors and educational leaders	To set and align expectations for mealtimes across rooms, inform or review service policies and procedures related to mealtimes, and plan professional learning and reflective discussions with staff.
Cooks, chefs, food coordinators and kitchen assistants	To coordinate how food is served and shared with children at the table, plan practical meal service routines with educators, and support calm, predictable mealtime environments.
Family day care educators	To adapt the principles to home-based mealtimes, plan flexible routines that respond to mixed-age groups.
Approved providers and management teams	To support consistent expectations across services, align mealtime practices with organisational policies, and identify areas where staff may benefit from further support or training.
Allied health partners (e.g. dietitians, speech pathologists, occupational therapists)	To align advice and support with the service's mealtime approach, provide practical suggestions that fit within everyday routines, and use a shared language with educators and families around mealtime environments and practices.
Quality and regulatory staff, inclusion support staff and local health promotion officers	To inform assessment and rating observations and guidance, support visits and resource development.
VET and university educators, RTOs and placement supervisors	To integrate mealtime environment and practices content into training programs, prepare students for real-world mealtime practice in ECEC, and support reflective conversations during placements.



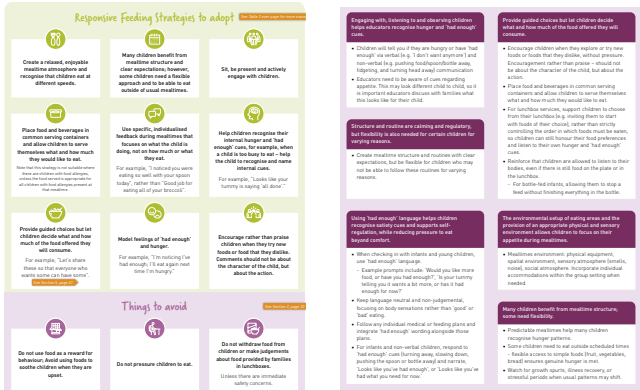
How to use this guide

Seven sections

The guide is divided into seven separate sections covering the following topics:

1. Appetite Regulation
2. Responsive Feeding and Hunger and 'Had Enough' Cue Recognition
3. Supporting Food preferences, Food Acceptance and Food Diversity
4. Development of Feeding, Eating and Drinking Practices
5. Language, Body Image and Responding to Eating Concerns
6. Managing Food Allergies
7. Designing Mealtime Approaches

Elements found across sections

Elements	Examples
Principles and practical strategies Generally presented in bullet points and found in the following formats:	

Vignettes including reflection and responses

A short moment and experience used for reflection, learning and information.

VIGNETTE 1
Food refusal



Liam is a three-year-old attending ECEC. During mealtimes, he often refuses foods with mixed textures, such as pasta with sauce or fruit salad, turning his head away or pushing the plate aside. Although Liam can sit at the table independently and use a fork or spoon, he often becomes upset when encouraged to try new foods.

At mealtimes, Liam may watch others eat but keeps his distance, occasionally tapping his fork on the plate or exploring the food with his fingers instead of eating. Liam can carry his own plate to the table. Educators have placed a 'tasting plate' in the centre of the table at each meal, offering a range of foods and textures for children to explore together.

Response

The use of a shared tasting plate and getting Liam to place this on the table each meal is an example of non-pressured, more positive food exploration that is age-appropriate. Using the 'Phased Approach to Incorporating a Relationship-focused (PAIR) framework' can help guide how educators respond during mealtimes. Following this approach, educators can put words to what children are doing or gently copy their actions to show interest and connection. With Liam, educators follow his lead in how he chooses to interact with the tasting plate.

For example, you might put words to what Liam is doing:

- "You're looking at our shared plate"
- "You are touching the banana slice on the shared plate"

Or you might model it and talk to it:

- "I am touching the banana too"

Recommendation statements

Highlight key points regarding language

RECOMMENDATION STATEMENT

Moving beyond 'healthy' in food talk (QA 2.1.3)

Links to Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard

Show the links to the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standard.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK Outcome 1, Outcome 3	NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD QA2, QA5
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Reflection questions

To consider in relation to information covered in each section.

Reflective questions



Educators

- Think about a child in your care. What hunger and satiety cues have you noticed?
- What are some examples of how you currently respond to children's hunger and satiety cues? What are some actions you could take to strengthen your practices?
- How do you create an inclusive environment where each child's appetite and varying abilities are respected?

Setting the scene

The following pages explore the foundations of responsive, inclusive mealtimes in ECEC. Mealtimes offer rich opportunities for educators to weave together safety, inclusion, and belonging within their everyday practice.

This section examines two key aspects that shape how to approach mealtimes: the language used to talk about food and eating, and how to meaningfully include all children. Understanding these foundations empowers educators to create mealtimes that are both safe and nurturing, mealtimes where regulatory requirements align with each child's developmental journey and cultural context, and where children feel valued, capable, and connected.

Language matters: Removing judgement from food talk

This section explores the MEP Recommendation Statement on language use and how thoughtful word choices support children's positive relationship with food, their bodies, and mealtimes as spaces of belonging.

RECOMMENDATION STATEMENT

Moving beyond 'healthy' in food talk (QA 2.1.3)

You won't find words like **'healthy'**, **'unhealthy'**, **'everyday foods'**, or **'sometimes foods'** used to describe foods or food choices throughout the MEP module.

These words sometimes give the impression that some foods are 'good', and others are 'bad', which can be confusing for educators and children. They can also moralise food choices and may contribute to shame.

Young children may not understand or care about whether the food they are eating is 'healthy', and some children may feel upset or shamed when the foods they enjoy or are served in their homes are called 'bad'. This can lead them to question whether they themselves are 'bad' for liking those foods. For some children, labels can increase anxiety or avoidance at mealtimes, and this may have a negative impact on children's relationships with food. In addition, saying some foods are 'unhealthy' can make children from food-insecure homes feel ashamed or embarrassed, especially if those are the only foods their families can access or afford.

Instead, when reading through the module, you will find plenty of examples of how to talk about food in a neutral or descriptive way – focusing on its colour, taste, smell, temperature, feel, texture, where it comes from and how we share it together. This language is inclusive and trauma-informed, and it supports cross-cultural food communication between educators, children and families. These ideas are easier for young children to understand and can help make food feel enjoyable and interesting.

This Best Practice Guide recommends that educators talk about food in similar ways and avoid using grouping words like 'healthy' or 'sometimes foods' in ECEC staff-child interactions.

By providing food options consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines, and creating non-pressured mealtime routines, children attending ECEC services will become familiar with a variety of foods over time.

RECOMMENDATION STATEMENT

Avoiding the word 'lifestyle' to signify acceptance

The word lifestyle is a broad, catch-all term that means different things to different people. In some instances, it can sound like a judgement on families, which is why we have chosen not to use the word 'lifestyle' in the Best Practice Guide. Routines around food are shaped by many things: work hours, caring load, budgets, transport, culture, and what's available locally. To keep our language kind and clear, we use neutral/descriptive words for food and eating, and encourage children to describe their own family's food and eating in a way that recognises each family's unique experience. Some families eat differently from other families, and that's OK.

What an inclusive approach to mealtimes looks like in practice

RECOMMENDATION STATEMENT

Participation (not consumption) is the primary goal for some children

An inclusive approach to ECEC mealtimes centres on creating a warm, predictable, and culturally safe environment where every child and family's mealtime routines, preferences, histories and needs are respected. Educators respond to children's cues, offer choice without pressure, and respect each family's routines and cultural practices. Inclusion in practice means noticing and adapting to the structural, sensory, familial, cultural and safety factors shaping each child's experience, and working alongside families as partners and experts in their child's mealtime needs.

It also recognises that children engage with food in diverse ways and that **participation (not consumption) is the primary goal for some children**. An inclusive approach emphasises emotional safety, autonomy, and respect for individual feeding needs, including for children who are tube-fed, have oral aversions, sensory sensitivities, allergies, or developmental differences.

This approach centres responsive feeding practices, where adults notice and interpret each child's cues, validate alternative ways of engaging with food (looking, touching, smelling, helping), and avoid pressure or judgement. Inclusivity also requires strong collaboration with families and allied health professionals to ensure mealtime practices align with individual feeding plans, therapeutic goals, and cultural considerations.

In practice, an inclusive mealtime environment in ECEC settings offers children meaningful roles and choices regardless of whether they eat orally. This includes passing serving utensils, choosing tableware, engaging in sensory exploration, or participating in conversations through speech, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), or gestures. Educators adapt seating, pacing, transitions, and sensory demands to support regulation and safety, including accommodations for dysphagia (difficulty swallowing), sensory overload, or medical devices. Structured mealtimes are implemented flexibly, with predictable routines, pressure-free exposure opportunities, and opportunities for social connection. Progress is understood inclusively, and tolerating proximity to food, engaging in sensory play, or communicating preferences is celebrated alongside eating. Educators use reflective practice to ensure their language, expectations, and modelling uphold dignity and belonging for every child.

What a trauma-informed approach to mealtimes looks like in practice

A trauma-informed approach within an ECEC setting draws from understandings from neuroscience and acknowledges that there are children who need an informed and (often) individualised approach to support them to engage well with relationships, learning, and activities (including mealtimes). This is because these children might be overly susceptible to not feeling safe and to emotional dysregulation. This approach is highly recommended for children who have experienced complex trauma (e.g. child maltreatment), but it is equally recommended for other children who might feel unsafe or who might emotionally dysregulate due to various other circumstances, associated with (for example) disability, sensory differences, previous allergic reactions or other adverse feeding experiences (e.g., choking, vomiting), grief and loss, etc.

A trauma-informed approach acknowledges that emotional dysregulation is a nervous system response that can lead to hyperarousal (fight or flight) or hypoarousal (freeze) responses, which can range from moderate to severe. If this happens around mealtimes, individual considerations and informed staff responses are vital to help children to co-regulate their emotions and to re-engage with the program. Certain fight or flight responses (e.g. yelling, throwing food, aggression) or freeze responses (e.g. hiding under furniture, or refusing to come to the table, or eat, or talk) can easily be interpreted as deliberate and defiant, when they may actually be the result of a neurobiological stress response.

When there is an understanding of what a dysregulated nervous response is, why it happens, and what we can do to help, these vulnerable children can be assisted back to a regulated state where they can engage, eat, and play. Moreover, trauma-informed mealtimes may reduce the incidence of these stress responses in susceptible children in the first place.

What supporting body confidence in the early years looks like in practice

The language adults use around food, bodies and eating in the early years plays a powerful role in shaping children's developing self-concept, body confidence and relationship with food. Everyday comments, routines and responses at mealtimes can either support children to trust their bodies and feel safe and included, or unintentionally introduce pressure, judgement or shame.

To support consistent, evidence-based practice, this Guide includes a dedicated section on Language, Body Image and Responding to Eating Concerns (see Section Five). Section Five provides practical guidance for educators and service leaders, including food-neutral language examples, strategies to promote positive body image, and clear steps for responding appropriately when eating concerns arise. These approaches are designed to be embedded across daily routines, particularly mealtimes, and used alongside responsive feeding practices to create calm, respectful and inclusive food environments for all children.