

CALL TO ACTION: Equitable access to nutrition and dietetic services for Early Childhood Education and Care

All children have the right to access adequate food and nutrition.¹ Dietitians are committed to ensuring Australians are given the best possible nutrition foundations in their early years of life. The profession can enable this through the early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting. These settings provide opportunities for infants and young children to experience supportive nutrition environments, develop a healthy relationship with food and enjoy a variety of nutritious meals, snacks and beverages for healthy growth, physical activity, early brain development, learning and behaviour management.²

Unfortunately, the current framework and system for ECEC falls short on assurances that infants and young children in centre-based care and family day care have access to optimal nutrition environments. Substantial government investment is urgently needed to provide equitable nutrition support to the ECEC sector.

What is urgently needed?

Dietitians Australia is calling for:

Universal access to dietitians

Dietitians in ECEC settings will enable providers to establish and maintain optimal nutrition environments for infants and young children in their care. Dietitians can:

- establish and implement centre-based policies and best practices for food and nutrition;
- ensure infants and young children have access to nutritious meals/snacks/beverages;
- provide evidence-informed nutrition support to ECEC employees, including cooks/chefs; and
- empower parents/caregivers with high quality, evidence-based nutrition guidance, extending support to the home environment.

Strengthened national ECEC food provision regulations and standards

The existing ECEC National Quality Standards provide one recommendation for ECEC, namely 'healthy eating and physical activity are promoted and appropriate for each child'.³ This standard is insufficiently detailed, focusing on hygienic food preparation. Nationally consistent regulations and standards should apply and contain additional information about supportive mealtime environments, managing food allergies, and nutritious, sustainable and affordable food provision. Strengthened guidance is also required to support jurisdictional quality rating authorities when assessing the nutrition environments of ECEC services.

Nationally consistent best-practice guidance for ECEC nutrition environments

To support the implementation of food provision regulations in a consistent, evidence-informed manner, best-practice guidance is required. Such guidance must reflect differing service types, different locations and the needs of different populations. Best-practice guidance must include nationally

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consistent menu planning guidelines, cover key food and nutrition issues (e.g. allergies and appropriate textures), be inclusive of diversity, consider the mealtime environment and the role of staff, and integrate environmental sustainability.

Nutrition training for all ECEC employees

To empower ECEC employees (directors, educators/teachers, cooks/chefs) to achieve optimal nutrition environments, training must be prioritised. Pre-service nutrition training via ECEC qualification requirements and access to ongoing professional development to maintain nutrition knowledge and skills is vital.

Background

The first 2,000 days of life, from conception to age five, is a period of rapid growth and brain development, providing an ideal opportunity to positively influence a child's health, growth, development, dietary habits, long-term taste preferences and appetite regulation,^{4,5} setting the foundation for the life course. Poor nutrition in early childhood contributes to malnutrition and negative child health outcomes that may persist into adulthood.⁶

Australia has one of the highest rates of food allergy instances in the world with 1 in 10 infants and 1 in 20 early adolescents having a food allergy.⁷ ECEC services need to undertake the complex task of meeting the nutritional needs of infants and young children with differing nutritional requirements, whilst protecting those with medical issues, including food allergies.⁸

The Australian Government, through the Department of Education and Services Australia, subsidises the cost of care via the Child Care Subsidy (CCS). A report on CCS approved care over the December quarter in 2023 revealed 1,484,720 children attended a CCS approved service, with 59.9% attending centre-based care for an average 27.1 - 38.3 hours per week.⁹ A further 5.1% of children attended family day care.⁹ Given the vast number of young children in care for significant hours each week, ECEC can be viewed as a 'proxy home' for many young children, and one of their main providers of food and nutrition. Current Australian benchmarks suggest at least 50% of daily dietary intakes be met for a child per full day of care,¹⁰ aligning with recommendations of other high-income countries.

In Australia, the National Quality Framework (NQF) guides the delivery of education and care to children.¹¹ The NQF outlines national law and regulations, national quality standards (NQS) and quality rating processes. Under the Education and Care Services National Regulations, an approved provider *"must ensure that policies and procedures are in place for nutrition, food and beverages, and dietary requirements (regulation 168) and take reasonable steps to ensure those policies and procedures are followed (regulation 170)"*. Implementation of this policy guidance however is not well supported, with no specific detail available within the NQS and no national ECEC food provision recommendations to operationalise the NQS.

State and territory government departments are responsible for the health, safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes of children in care. Across Australia, 3 of the 8 jurisdictions provide food-provision guidelines, nutrition support and resources to the ECEC sector, resulting in inefficiencies and unnecessary duplication of effort to address food provision challenges within the ECEC sector.¹⁰ In addition to inequitable access to on-the-ground nutrition support, ECEC services may also require targeted support where food insecurity and nutrition-related health disparities are apparent.¹²

ECEC employees have reported barriers to achieving optimal nutrition environments due to lack of nutrition knowledge and inconsistencies in food/nutrition guidelines.¹³ There is evidence that highlights national gaps in the implementation of best-practice nutrition,¹⁴ and a need to improve centre-based nutrition policies,^{15,16} provide evidence-based nutrition training,^{13,17} and integrate emerging trends such as environmental sustainability.¹⁸

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