

Nutrition in Early Childhood Education and Care in South Australia

Call to Action

Dietitians Australia calls on the South Australian Government, the Opposition and all parties, **to commit to early years nutrition and ensure safer food environments in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings**, as part of their SA election platforms.

By investing in this priority, the elected Government and supporting political parties will:

- guarantee safety and quality in early learning by building scaffolding across the system
- strengthen the stability and capability of the ECEC workforce
- boost children's developmental readiness to learn at school
- contribute to this Government's goal to deliver high quality early years and preschool services and better support a child's first 1000 days
- support parental workforce participation, especially women's employment, through reliable provision of safe, nutritious food.

The return on this investment is clear: fewer children in South Australia will be developmentally vulnerable and food insecure, delivering long-term benefits for families, communities, and the state's future prosperity.

Goal

Embed nutrition as a core pillar of South Australia's universal preschool ambition, making healthy eating, safe food environments and food literacy routine in ECEC settings, with equity for disadvantaged communities and accountability through data.

Background

Our passionate and dedicated ECEC and preschool sector needs support to grow its skills and abilities to enable children to thrive and grow. Unlike in other jurisdictions, a clear strategy to address healthy and safe food provision in South Australian ECEC settings is notably absent from current programming and initiatives. This includes the Early Years Strategy, the Preschool Boost menu, and freely accessible guidance offered by the government. Exacerbating these concerns is the impact of cost of living on food insecurity and increasing nutrition vulnerability in young children, as evidenced in the recent SA Social Development Committee Inquiry Report.

This service gap creates an unbalanced system, contributing to an inequitable health and child development divide which is difficult to shift successfully later in life.

Election priority 1

Commit to supporting South Australian ECEC providers to meet and exceed the National Quality Standards by embedding nutrition curriculum, healthy eating and safe food environments as a core pillar of quality early learning.

Safe and quality food and nutrition in ECEC policy package

This package of policy recommendations is designed to ensure all children in ECEC receive safe, nutritious food and drinks every day, regardless of where they live and the service they attend.

Pillar 1: Capacity building for the ECEC sector

- **Objective:** Equip educators, cooks, and leaders in long day care, family day care, preschool and integrated learning hubs with skills and confidence to nurture safe and healthy food environments, meeting or exceeding the National Quality Framework (NQF) Quality Area 2.1 with support from Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) to assist the sector with implementation.
- **Key actions:**
 - Invest in statewide training and professional development on food literacy curriculum, responsive and allergy-safe feeding and nutritious menu planning.
 - Provide practical implementation supports including access to APDs, resources and guidance for healthy, safe food procurement and provision, and culturally safe practices.
 - Establish a peer-to-peer network of healthy food environment champions within the ECEC sector.
- **Agency lead:** Office for Early Childhood Development with Department for Education and Preventive Health SA as key partners.

Pillar 2: Menu review and nutrition advisory service to ECEC services

- **Objective:** Provide expert tailored advice to ECEC services (including long day care, family day care) to deliver menus that meet nutrition, food safety and allergy management standards and children's needs.
- **Key actions:**
 - Invest in a centralised organisation to implement menu review services accessible to all long day care and family day care providers in South Australia, with priority to government owned centres to set an industry benchmark, and centres working towards meeting Standard 2.1 and element 2.1.3.
 - Deploy regional APD nutrition advisors to consult directly with ECEC providers to ensure equity across the 10 publicly funded South Australian Local Health Networks
 - Offer tailored support for disadvantaged, rural, and Aboriginal communities
- **Agency lead:** Preventive Health SA in partnership with the Office for Early Childhood Development and SA Health.

Pillar 3: Workforce and practical resources for the ECEC sector and families

- **Objective:** Make high quality safe and healthy food environments the easy choice and improve health and development outcomes for children with trusted advice, culturally safe supports and consistent ECEC practice.
- **Key actions:**
 - Incorporate APDs into Integrated Learning Hub models across South Australia.
 - Deliver APD-led ECEC professional development including training and resources, menu planning support, healthy food procurement and provision, curriculum integration, and positive, responsive and allergy-safe feeding practices.
 - Invest in FTE for APDs to support ECECs across the 10 publicly funded South Australian Local Health Networks and create an ECEC nutrition advisor network to support services, educators and cooks/chefs.
 - Enable APDs to contribute to co-producing standardised, culturally safe feeding resources (pregnancy to age five), menu planning tools, and parent education modules (multilingual) with families and the ECEC sector.
 - Build capability across the sector to recognise and address food insecurity through funding, and advisory functions.
- **Agency lead:** Office for Early Childhood Development with Preventive Health SA and SA Health (Child and Family Health services) as key partners.

Pillar 4: Mandatory allergen and anaphylaxis training

- **Objective:** Ensure every child is safe from food allergy risks in ECEC environments, providing the South Australian Government with a national leadership opportunity in this area.
- **Key actions:**
 - Mandate and monitor uptake of allergen and anaphylaxis training for all staff working with children, including cooks and educators in long day care, family day care and preschools
 - Revamp and mandate the *DoFoodSafely* training as a consistent benchmark for all centres.
 - Provide accredited training modules and refresher courses every two years.
 - Integrate allergy management into ECEC quality assurance processes, using National Allergy Council's 'Best practice guidelines for anaphylaxis prevention and management in children's education and care' to guide and advise
- **Agency lead:** Office for Early Childhood Development with SA Health as key partner.

Pillar 5: Mandated nutrition standards in ECEC settings

- **Objective:** Ensure all children in ECEC receive safe, nutritious food and drinks every day with clear direction and sector support for implementation provided by APDs.

- **Key actions:**
 - Mandate nutrition standards in quality standards and regulatory frameworks for safe, consistent food procurement and provision in ECEC services.
 - Align with quality and regulatory frameworks to incorporate as part of business-as-usual assessment and improvement.
 - Enable support for implementation of standards, including training delivered by APDs to ensure children's safety.
 - Provide compliance monitoring and reporting through the lead agency.
- **Agency lead:** Office for Early Childhood Development with the Education Standards Board, Department for Education and Preventive Health SA as key partner.

Election Priority 2

Commit to seamless delivery of the *Safe and quality food and nutrition in ECEC policy recommendations* (Election Priority 1) through designating a single accountable lead agency to set priorities, coordinate delivery, and report publicly.

Lead Agency policy package

Lead agency for early childhood nutrition – Office for Early Childhood Development

- **Objective:** To enact the key actions of each pillar described under Election Priority 1, create accountable leadership to prioritise safe, quality food and nutrition practices and food security across the early years through partnership with education, health and community portfolios.
- **Key actions:**
 - Cabinet to designate the Office of Early Childhood Development as lead agency.
 - Establish an Early Childhood Nutrition Unit within the Office of Childhood Development to coordinate approach, programs, data and reporting.
 - Co-ordinated partnerships – the South Australian government to adopt a cross-agency approach to meet policy objectives.
- **Key partner agencies:** SA Health (Child and Family Health), SA Health (Food Safety and Regulation), Department for Child Protection and Department of Human Services., Preventive Health SA and the Department for Education.

References:

- Lum, M. et al 2023 Implementation of healthy eating and physical activity practices in Australian early childhood education and care services: A cross-sectional study. *Preventive Medicine Reports* 36 (2023) 102455 doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2023.102455
- Policy Brief 1 – Achieving Equality and Equity in the Provision of Food and Nutrition Support in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings: Opportunities and Actions for System Change in Australia, National Nutrition Network, Feb 19, 2023 Characteristics of Effective Interventions Promoting Healthy Eating for Preschoolers in Childcare Settings: An Umbrella Review, Louisa Matwiejczyk, Kaye Mehta, Jane Scott, Emma Tonkin and John Coveney. *Nutrients* 2018, 10(3), 293; <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10030293>