

A case for mapping Food Provision across jurisdictions and ECEC services and settings:

How one tick box can build and support the bigger picture in early childhood health and education development

The Big Picture— Food in ECEC settings

Over 900,000 children up to school-age attend ECEC services,¹ meaning that these children could be accessing of their daily dietary intake whilst at an ECEC service.

ECEC services present an opportunity to support child development through nutritious food provision and environments^{2,3}

Food provision type and quality varies greatly across ECEC services and settings⁴

By improving food provision we can increase the quality of food environments and positively impact:

- Child developmental outcomes
- Short, medium and long term health outcomes

The Missing Piece— Food Provision Data

There is a lack of relevant and consistent data available identifying the **type of food service provision** across ECEC services.

We know food access, food provision and food quality play a vital role in supporting early child education and health development. Without understanding the range and context of food access and provision in ECEC settings, existing, emerging and future support services, programs and training run the risk of:

Not addressing existing and actual gaps and needs

Not reflecting the needs of all ECEC services

Doubling up on existing support whilst leaving other areas of need unattended

Overlooking key staff within ECEC healthy food environments, such as Cooks

Overlooking the importance of partnership roles with Parents/Carers

Overlooking key external stakeholders needs such as third party food provision providers

Burdening ECEC Educators with requirements and tasks not suited to their role

The Reason for Needing to Know

A QLD Case Study

A recent study in QLD⁴ undertook data collection on food provision and compared their findings with readily available data. It tested associations between meal provision in ECEC services, child developmental vulnerability, geographic and social disadvantage, ECEC fee structure and market competition. By collecting and utilizing food provision data the study was able to identify the following:

- Children living in disadvantaged communities where food insecurity is inevitably higher, are least likely to have meals provided by their ECEC service.
- While overall services in the most disadvantaged areas were less likely to provide food, those services located in disadvantaged metropolitan areas were more likely to provide food due to higher market competition.

This case study demonstrates that using simple food provision data, and integrating with existing data, provides an opportunity to identify contexts and areas of need in relation to food provision.

The Call for Action

To collect relevant and consistent data on Food Provision in ECEC Services.

What are the solutions?

Embedding an opportunity to capture food provision methods in childcare management or assessment and rating systems.

Providing open access databases which include ECEC services food provision types such as, food provided on site, lunchbox service, third party food provider to support evidence-based resource allocation and research.

What are the costs?

Collecting through existing mechanisms ensures marginal costs are minimal.

In addition, the marginal costs would be offset by the net benefits of more efficient and effective resource allocation and the impact of improved child health and education development outcomes.

What are the risks?

Collecting through existing mechanisms ensures minimal marginal risk.

Inaction is the greater risk.



How one tick box can build and support the bigger picture

What is the ask?

For the Education sector

Collect data on the following one question:
In your service, how do children access food?

1. Food provided on site (i.e., prepared and provided onsite by a qualified chef or cook)
2. All meals prepared and provided onsite by an educator or other staff member
3. Third party caterer is contracted to provide meals to children
4. Parents are asked to provide morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea
5. Other, please specify (e.g. parents are asked to provide morning tea or lunch only, centre provides rest)

For the Public Health sector

Use this data to improve the support services it provides to the ECEC sector

The AEDC states ‘Investing time, effort and resources in children’s early years—when their brains are developing rapidly—brings lifelong benefits to them and to the whole community’. Ensuring nutritional needs can be met (whether a service is a food provider or a lunchbox service) is integral to that development.

The public health/nutrition sector is tasked and supported to deliver these services to the ECEC sector, but how effectively it can deliver those support services depends on having the best understanding of the diversity of needs of the sector and range of services within.

What impact can asking this one question have for how ECEC services are supported?

Equity

Equity of support service provision distributed towards actual needs of services, children and families

Empowerment

Development of support services, resources and training that reflect the diversity of needs and contexts of ECEC educators, assessment and rating officers and ECEC Service Directors/Managers

Local collaborations

Local collaborations to support ECEC services and communities

Building capacity

Targeted support to address the range of ECEC food provision types including cooks, third party providers and lunchbox provision

Efficiency

Increase relevant Continuing Professional Development to meet contexts and needs of educators, cooks and ECEC Directors to ensure healthy food environments

Mapping nutrition to the AEDC Domains and Research Priorities

Physical health and wellbeing Domain⁵

Experience some or many challenges that interfere with their ability to physically cope with the school day

Hunger, low levels of energy and tiredness have a direct connection to food access, provision and quality

Mapping nutrition to the AEDC Research Priority List⁶

A research priority of the AEDC National Committee 2021-2023 was to enhance linkages between the AEDC and other data sets. The goal of this priority is to better understand the drivers of early childhood development in the home, the community and early childhood education and care settings.

Collecting this one food provision question would enable the public health/nutrition support services to achieve this priority.

References

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6. The Australian Early Development Census (October 2022) *AEDC Research Priorities* <https://www.aedc.gov.au/researchers/research-priorities>

The National Nutrition Network—ECEC

The National Nutrition Network—ECEC is made up of individuals working in research, policy and practice across Australia and internationally and with a public health and ECEC focus, specifically in the areas of nutrition and public health and with most major programs, initiatives and organisations represented in its membership.

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