

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

What is the problem?

There is a lack of *equality* in the provision and accessibility of initiatives, programs, services, training and resources which support ECEC settings to provide safe and healthy food environments across Australia.

Support initiatives, programs, services and resources differ across jurisdictions and are either generic and free, customised and free or customised and at cost, resulting in unequal distribution and access to currently available support initiatives, programs, services and resources.

There is a lack of *equity* in the provision and accessibility of support initiatives, programs, services training and resources which support ECEC settings to provide safe and healthy food environments across Australia.

The ECEC settings, localities, children and families most in need of support services tend to have the least access to sustainable and long term support initiatives, programs, services and resources.

What is the opportunity?

ECEC services often provide up to two-thirds of children's daily food intake and have an opportunity to create supportive environments for optimal nutrition and development.

Babies and young children have the highest rates of food allergy, providing education and training to ECEC services increases child safety and improve quality of life for both the child and their parents/guardians.

ECEC services are a pathway for engaging with families to optimize nutrition and food safety for children, particularly in jurisdictions that do not have strong and sustainable relevant public health networks.

Evidence and place based credible support initiatives, programs and resources have been shown to improve practice and change in ECEC food environments.

Knowledge and practice improvement in ECEC food environments have been shown to lead to improved nutritional health outcomes.

Increased nutritional and health outcomes support learning and development outcomes and help governments achieve **health** policy objectives.

Increased nutritional and health outcomes support learning and development outcomes and help governments achieve **education** policy objectives.

What is the background to the problem?

There are currently only three jurisdictions within Australia that provide free government supported state-wide healthy eating support services for ECEC settings (NSW, Victoria and Tasmania).

Whilst all ECEC services and settings have access to some form of support aimed at improving food environments there are generally three different ways that support services have been offered to ECEC services:

1. **Generic and Free to Services**
2. **Customised and Free to Services**
3. **Customised and Cost to Services**

Even though it can be claimed that generic and free resources are available to all, when viewed through an equity lens the gap in support services across jurisdictions becomes even wider.

- **National generic resources do not address existing gaps and needs**
- **National generic resources are not equally relevant to all services**
- **New initiatives have been shown to double up on existing services.**

The problem with paying for resources and services is that most services cannot afford the cost, therefore the cost is prohibitive to services accessing support.

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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The authors' content in this document represents the National Nutrition Networks stance and does not represent views of other employers the authors may have.

What are some solutions to support ECEC food environments?

Recommendations

- ★ Ensure that funded state-wide interventions supporting food environments and food provision are available in every jurisdiction across Australia and are responsive to the diversity of local needs across the whole jurisdiction.
- ★ Ensure that newly developed support initiatives, programs, services and resources supporting food environments and food provision fill identified needs and gaps in support service provisions to avoid duplication.
- ★ Ensure that funded food environments and food provision interventions are based on principles of accessibility, greatest need and equitable access.

Improvements

There is a need for more specialised support targeted to those most in need, such as:

- ✔ Support services and resources that address and reflect the diverse needs of different types of services in relation to food environments—Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Home Care.
- ✔ Focus on both lunch box services and food provision services, including external food service providers.
- ✔ Ensure the needs of children and families who have food allergies are considered in all elements of support services from policy and training to learning and engagement activities for children.
- ✔ Acknowledge and support the specific dietary needs of infants and young children, and increase educator efficacy to support through up to date training and professional development.
- ✔ Provide advice and support on inclusion of children with a disability.
- ✔ Acknowledge and reflect the diverse experiences of families such as families who may be food insecure.
- ✔ Food environments and supporting services and resources reflect and represent a variety of cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- ✔ Reflect and represent the needs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities with respect to food environments and supporting services and resources.
- ✔ Reflect the range of contexts and lived experiences found across all services, the staff that work within the services and the communities they operate in when responding to healthy ECEC food environments.