

Getting Started Guide

Early childhood services



Why promote healthy eating?

Early childhood services (ECS) play a big role in the health and wellbeing of the children in their care.

Eating habits are instilled from a young age, so by providing nutritious foods and drinks, you can help children establish positive eating behaviours early.

The benefits include healthy growth and development, good mental and oral health and a reduced risk of developing health issues later in life. The benefits of providing and promoting healthy foods and drinks:

- Helps your service meet the healthy food and drink requirements of the [National Quality Framework](#), and menu planning guidelines.
- Children will learn better and be more alert when they eat well.
- Supports your service to achieve objectives of other health initiatives such as the [Achievement Program \(Healthy Early Childhood Services\)](#) or [Smiles 4 Miles](#).
- A healthier diet is environmentally sustainable. For example, preparing fresh and healthy foods from scratch can reduce food waste and packaging.

How to support healthy eating in early childhood services

A service that is effectively providing and promoting healthier food and drinks will:

- provide food and drinks on their menus that meet the relevant healthy eating guidelines for children

- have a mealtime set up that supports healthy eating and is age/developmentally appropriate
- have a healthy eating policy and relevant procedures in place to support healthy eating and healthy changes
- promote healthy eating messages in the curriculum
- engage with families to support them in reinforcing healthy eating messages at home.

The steps below outline the ideal process you can follow to achieve this; however, it may not always be possible or suitable to work through them in the recommended order.

You should aim to make progress where you can and in an order suitable to your context and ability.



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Step 1

Secure leadership commitment and engage key stakeholders

To bring about long-lasting healthy changes leadership from management and commitment from others such as room leaders, educators and food service staff in your organisation is important.

Gaining this support should be one of your first steps.

When managers actively lead change, it helps everyone in your service to feel supported and motivated to be involved.

To start the process of making healthy changes:

- speak to managers about the importance of healthy eating, obtain their ongoing support for making healthy changes and encourage them to take an active role in the change process
- communicate that healthy eating changes assist the service to meet requirements of the National Quality Standard and regulations and demonstrate best practice to the parents and carers of the children at your service
- work with management to ensure there is adequate time, money, resourcing and support for changes

Remember, healthy eating is not a job for just one person! In fact, everyone in your service has a role to play.

Once you have secured management support:

- create a working group or committee that includes key staff, healthy eating champions and management; then select someone to coordinate the group (this group can drive change, decide on goals, timelines and strategies, and encourage and support other staff to participate)
- create a healthy eating policy for your service (see Step 2 below - Develop a healthy eating policy).



Step 2

Develop a healthy eating policy

Creating a healthy eating policy in your service will help to embed and sustain healthy changes.

It also provides your service's community (staff and parents) with clear and consistent information about your goals and practices.

Your healthy eating working group can work together to develop a new policy or review your existing one. Once this policy is approved, communicate it to your whole service community.

The policy should include benchmarks related to:

- leadership and commitment
- a healthy physical environment
- a healthy culture
- child teaching and learning
- supported staff and educators
- families and community partnerships.

Having a healthy eating policy is also a requirement of The National Quality Standard and The Achievement Program.



Key resource

- [Factsheet: Creating a healthy eating policy.](#)

Step 3

Recommend staff complete online training

Service staff can learn how to plan healthy menus and promote healthy eating with our free online training modules.

Online training can be completed anywhere, anytime. Each module takes less than one hour to complete and participants receive a certificate of completion.

The following options are available:

Healthy eating in long day care

In this training module, long day care cooks and educators will learn:

- about the healthy food and drink guidelines for long day care
- how to plan healthy menus
- simple meal, snack and drink ideas for children
- healthy ingredient swaps and shopping tips
- ways to deal with challenges like food allergies and budgeting
- and much more!

Promoting healthy eating in long day care

In this training module, long day care educators will learn:

- how to promote healthy eating in the classroom and at mealtimes
- common barriers to children's acceptance of new foods and how to overcome them
- strategies to engage families in developing healthy eating habits.



Key resource

- Training: Early childhood services

Step 4

Assess current menus

You can assess your service's current menus to see if they meet the relevant healthy food and drink guidelines. You can start with assessing 1-2 weeks at a time, instead of assessing them all at once.

You can assess long day care menus with our free online self-assessment tool, FoodChecker.

With FoodChecker, you can enter all the food and drinks provided on each week's menu to receive a detailed report that highlights areas where the menu meets the guidelines, and provides specific recommendations for healthy changes.

You can also use FoodChecker to download a copy of the menu for display and print a shopping list with all ingredients needed for the week.



FoodChecker

Step 5

Making changes

The following steps can be done in any order and at the same time.

Make healthy changes to your menus

After completing training and assessing your menu, you can start making healthy changes to your current menus and plan future ones. The best way to start is by making simple changes that will have a big impact.

You can use FoodChecker or the checklists for family day care to plan new menus and update existing ones.

Start by making sure:

- all meals and snacks are based on food from the five food groups: fruits; vegetables and legumes; grain (cereal) foods; milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives; lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds and legumes/beans)
- there is a variety of fruit and vegetables
- 'discretionary' foods and drinks with little nutritional value are not on the menu
- water is freely available

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Key resources

- [Menu planning guidelines for your service](#)
- [Sample menus](#)
- [Recipes](#)
- [Allergies and intolerances](#)

Promote healthy eating

Educators have an important role to play in promoting healthy eating to children.

The National Quality Framework recommends that early childhood services support all aspects of children's health, including healthy eating, ensuring that they are teaching children that healthy lifestyles underpin everyday routines and experiences.

Examples of how educators can promote healthy eating include:

- teaching children about healthy eating through discussions, questions, games and cooking activities
- making mealtimes relaxed and comfortable
- talking in positive ways about the healthy foods children are eating
- encouraging children to try new foods.



Key resources

- [Factsheet: Promote healthy eating](#)
- [Training: Early childhood services](#)

Host healthy events and fundraising

Early childhood services can reinforce healthy eating messages and create a healthy culture by incorporating healthy foods and drinks into events and fundraising activities.

This includes 'special menus' for birthdays or other celebrations, or family and community events, making healthy eating the 'norm'.

You could plan a calendar of healthy eating promotions, including events that involve families and reinforce healthy eating messaging (such as Harmony Day or Book Week).

You can also replace traditional fundraising activities, such as cake stalls and chocolate drives with healthier options or non-food alternatives.



Key resources

- [Factsheet: Healthy fundraising](#)
- [Factsheet: Celebration days](#)



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Step 6

Celebrate success

It is important to continually reflect on, communicate and celebrate your progress with everyone in the service. This is a great way to keep staff and families involved and motivated.

You could provide regular updates and share achievements in your newsletter, notice boards, social media, in conversations – even through your service's communication app (e.g. Storypark). These platforms all provide a great way to celebrate and share your successes.

Hosting healthy events that involve the community, such as healthy lunches or cooking activities with families, is another way to promote and celebrate your achievements and reinforce healthy messaging.

Communicating successes can also demonstrate to management the impact you have made and may help you to secure their ongoing support.



Step 7

Maintaining changes

Maintaining your healthy changes and ensuring healthy eating remains a priority in your organisation is important.

Your service's healthy eating working group can help to keep healthy eating on the radar by ensuring a healthy eating policy is in place and is continually reviewed and updated. They can also plan fun healthy eating activities and events throughout the year.

We recommend that you:

- Review your menus every 12-24 months to ensure they still meet the guidelines.
- Use [FoodChecker](#) to plan new menus or reassess menus that have changed. Include this as a requirement in your policies and procedures to help ensure ongoing guideline compliance.
- Review your healthy eating policy every 12-24 months.

Other things you can do include:

- Keep the enthusiasm up with families, staff and children by continuing to celebrate success and everyday healthy stories.

- Ensure all new staff complete the online training as part of their induction.
- Speak to the service manager about communicating your healthy eating plan to families so they know when to expect changes.
- Monitor how your service is progressing.
- Seek feedback from staff and families (via surveys and similar) to identify any issues and make sure you are on track to achieve your goal.



Supporting you in making healthy changes

The Healthy Eating Advisory Service is here to support your service. If you'd like assistance in any of the above steps please contact our dedicated Nutrition Policy Advisor:

Infoline: 1300 22 52 88

Email: heas@nutritionaustralia.org.au