

Guided professional development session for cooks networks

Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to guide health promotion officers to facilitate a professional development session about managing fussy eating in long day care, within their cooks network. It contains all the information and expertise you'll need to facilitate a session including background information, instructional videos, guided activities, and activity sheets. This guide can be used for face-to-face, online, or hybrid cooks networks.

Please note: Contact HEAS for support if you are asked a question which you're unsure how to answer.

Background

The [National Quality Standard \(NQS\)](#) and [National Regulations](#) require long day care services to provide nutritious and varied menus that also meet the cultural, health and religious needs of each child. Victorian services are recommended to use the Healthy Eating Advisory Service's (HEAS) [Menu planning guidelines for long day care](#) when developing menus. These guidelines help long day care services to plan menus that meet the NQS, align with the [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#) and meet the nutritional needs of children aged 1 – 5 years.

Fussy eating is a common challenge for many long day care services. There isn't one standard definition for fussy eating, and you might also hear it referred to as picky, faddy, choosy, or selective eating. It is usually characterised by an unwillingness to eat familiar foods, or try new foods, and displaying strong food preferences.

It's common for young children to be fussy about food. They may refuse to try something new, stating they dislike the taste, shape, colour, texture, or even temperature of some foods. It's also common for children to like something one day but then dislike it the next. Their appetites can also vary from day to day, eating everything offered on one day and seemingly nothing the next. When children don't feel hungry, they are more likely to be fussy about the foods they will eat.

Choosing what to eat and what not to eat is a normal part of a child's development. This is how they explore their environment and start to assert their independence. Children's appetites can also vary depending on how much they're growing and how active they are.

This professional development session provides an overview of what fussy eating is and why it is common in children attending long day care. There are practical activities, discussion topics, and strategies to help long day care services manage fussy eating and support children to enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods.

Lesson plan: Managing fussy eating in long day care

<p>Goal</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase long day care cooks understanding of fussy eating and why it is common in young children. 2. Increase long day cooks' skills in managing and supporting fussy eating and supporting children to learn about new foods and develop a long-term positive relationship with food.
<p>Materials required (presenter)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity sheet 1 (1 per participant) • Activity answer sheet 1 (1 for HPO only) • Activity sheet 2 (1 per participant) • Activity answer sheet 2 (1 for HPO only) • HEAS Malaysian Fish Curry recipe • Editable Certificate of Completion (Personalised per participant) <p>Optional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback survey (1 per participant) • Introducing new foods to children • Introducing new foods to children - video series • Cooking with kids • Healthy eating games & activities • VegKit Taste & Learn for Early Years <p>More helpful resources can be found on the HEAS website https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/</p>
<p>Materials required (participant)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pens, note paper • A single food item for activity 1 (e.g. piece of fruit, vegetable) - the food item is ideally a food the cook has never eaten before, or not regularly eaten. If this is not practical, it can be any food the cook has access to.

Learning outcomes

1. Understand what fussy eating is, in the context of early childhood development, including contributing factors and when it's appropriate to inform parents or guardians.
2. Understand how addressing fussy eating as a whole-of-service approach can meet sections of the National Quality Standards.
3. Learn practical strategies to implement during the menu planning and cooking process.
4. Learn practical strategies and alternative ways of presenting of food during mealtimes.

Lesson plan: Managing fussy eating in long day care

5. Understand what responsive feeding and the division of responsibility are and how this can be incorporated into the mealtime environment at long day care.
6. Understand the importance of mealtime structure and routine for young children.
7. Understand the importance of positive role modelling and learn appropriate language to use about food during a mealtime.
8. Learn different ways to explore new foods with children through sensory exploration.
9. Understand what pressure during a mealtime looks like and importance of avoiding pressure tactics.
10. Learn ways to incorporate food learning through curriculum activities.

Lesson plan	Activities	Estimated duration
Introduction	Session outline	5 mins
Part 1: What is fussy eating	Instructional video 1 Activity 1 - food exploration using our senses. Discussion	Video: 7 mins Activity 1 + discussion: 10 mins
Part 2: Strategies in the kitchen	Instructional video 2 Activity 2 - Alternative ways to serve meals. (Note: video 2 includes two breaks for discussion during the video. This is outlined below under Activity 2) Discussion	Video + breaks for discussion: 10 mins Activity 2 + discussion: 10 mins
Part 3: The mealtime	Instructional video 3 Activity 3 - How could I respond? (Note: there is no activity sheet for download. The questions and answers are available under Activity 3)	Video: 5 mins Discussion activity: 5-10 mins
Summary and consolidation	Session summary Q&A session FAQs	5 + mins
Acknowledgement	Certificate of completion	

Next steps

Homework: Implement one or more changes to your menu (e.g. provide at least 1 or 2 meals as a 'deconstructed meal') based on what has been learned today.

Part 1. What is fussy eating?

Instructional video 1

The following video covers:

- An overview of what fussy eating is.
- Why some children are fussy with food.
- When it might be a bigger problem and importance of informing the child's parents or guardians.
- The importance of implementing a whole-of-service approach to support fussy eating in your service.

The video is developed by dietitians from Nutrition Australia's Healthy Eating Advisory Service.

Play video content >



Activity 1: Food exploration using our senses

In this first activity, we are going to learn and understand how to use our senses in the lead up to tasting a food. As adults, we typically approach eating as a 2-step process: we sit down at the table, then we eat.

For many children, trying a new food involves multiple senses while simultaneously engaging in different processes, such as sitting at the table, managing utensils, feeding themselves, and responding to questions from those around them at the table, all in the lead up to learning about a new food.

This activity aims to help adults take a step back from our usual process of eating food by engaging with our senses and imagining we are trying something new for the first time again, just like many children. Coriander has been used as an example for this activity, as it is a polarising herb which many people have strong taste preferences for. However, you can use any food which is new or perhaps not consumed regularly.

As well as the basic instructions for the activity, have some discussion points ready to encourage conversation amongst the group. Discussion points can be especially helpful for online Cooks Network sessions. Example questions are included in the answer sheet, and you may like to use some of these questions during your discussions.

Objectives

1. For cooks to understand the different senses we use when eating a food.
2. For cooks to understand and appreciate what young children may be experiencing when eating or trying a new food for the first time.

Download and distribute: [Activity sheet 1](#) to network members.

Download: [Answer sheet 1](#) for Health Promoter, including example discussion points

Part 2. Strategies in the kitchen

Instructional video 2

In the next video, we're going to look at some strategies to implement in the menu planning process and cooking process when considering how to support fussy eating. We'll also discuss some contemporary feeding strategies to implement in your centre, known as responsive feeding and the division of responsibility.

During the second video, there are two slides where we recommended you pause, at the beginning of the slide, for discussion with the cooks:

1. Hiding vegetables – discuss the following at the start of the slide:
 - How often do you hide vegetables in dishes?
 - Is this an effective approach?
 - Are there any reasons we might not want to only hide vegetables?

After the discussion, you can resume the video to hear the advice recommended about hiding vegetables in dishes.

2. On-demand alternatives – discuss the following at the start of the slide:
 - How often are children, or educators, requesting on-demand alternatives to what has been provided?
 - What impact does this have to the mealtime?
 - Is it an effective strategy to use?

After the discussion, you can resume the video to hear the advice recommended about providing on-demand alternatives.

Play video content >



Activity 2: Different ways to serve meals

In this activity, we're going to explore different ways we can serve meals in the long day care setting. During the video, we will learn about different ways to serve the main meal. This will include:

- Serving familiar foods alongside new foods
- Serving sides as options to the main meal
- Deconstructing the meal. This involves preparing as many ingredients as practical, separately, and then allowing children to serve themselves from the food provided on the table.

Serving meals which also include familiar foods, with different sides, or in a 'deconstructed' way, has many benefits to the mealtime:

- Allows for autonomy – children choose from the options on offer
- Children eat according to how hungry or full they are
- Exposes children to many different foods – they may not eat everything presented, but are still exposed to different food by seeing it served on the table or other children eating the food
- Helps children develop other skills, such as using serving utensils
- Makes mealtimes more social, with less mealtime battles

Note: Children under 2 will need help serving food on their plates or bowls. Educators may need to bring the dishes to them to show what is on offer.

Objectives

1. For cooks to understand the benefits of providing young children with options and choices during the mealtime.
2. For cooks to consider and have ideas for alternative ways to serve snacks and main meals to young children.

Download and distribute: [Activity Sheet 2](#) to network members.

Download: [Answer Sheet 2](#) for Health Promoter, including example discussion points

Part 3. The Mealtime

Instructional video 3

In this last video, we'll now look at the mealtime environment which can help foster positive eating behaviours in young children. We will discuss routine and structure, conversation and language about food, sensory exploration of new foods, and additional extracurricular activities you can implement in your centre.

Play video content >



Activity 3: What do you think?

Please note: There is no activity and answer sheet for Activity 3. Use the following discussion points to generate further interaction in the group. Discussion points can be especially helpful for online cooks network sessions.

You may use as few or as many of the discussion questions as you would like.

1. What are some common words, phrases, or complaints you hear from children at your centre about the food? How do you respond to these?

Suggested responses for children who say 'no', 'yuck', 'disgusting', 'I'm not eating that':

- *"That's okay, you don't have to eat that today. But what's another word we can use to describe the food? Is it spicy, or crunchy? It feels crunchy for me in my mouth when I chew it."*
- *"You can serve yourself from the choices provided. If you don't want to eat the Bolognese sauce, you can serve yourself some plain pasta."*
- *"It's ok if you don't like that food at the moment, you're still learning about that food. I just learnt to like feijoas! They are a fruit which looks a bit similar to kiwi fruit."*

Top tip!

See FAQs towards the end of the lesson plan for additional advice when implementing strategies to manage and support fussy eating.

2. Do educators request something else for children who refuse to eat what's served, such as a sandwich? How can we change this?

Suggested responses for cooks:

- Inform educators that additional familiar foods or sides will be served alongside the main meal, or meals will be served in a 'deconstructed way'.
- Let educators know that providing more options with the main meal will help allow children feel they have more choice and control during the mealtime.
- Ask educators to encourage children to serve themselves, from the options provided.
- Encourage all cooks, educators, and directors to follow the Division of Responsibility: "carer provides, child decides".

3. Are foods currently used as rewards or incentives during mealtimes or other times at your centre? Do you feel this is an effective approach?

Suggested discussion responses:

- Using foods, such as chocolate, lollies, and ice-cream, as rewards can make those foods seem more appealing to young children.
- Rewarding children with food also encourages them to eat when they don't feel hungry.
- Rewarding a child to eat certain foods, such as vegetables, tends to reduce their liking for that food, by sending a message that the food is bad.
- Giving children food to praise them or help them feel better can cause children to become reliant on food to regulate their emotions, as well as associate being good or happy with certain foods.

Objectives

1. To understand the 'Division of Responsibility' during a mealtime in the long day care environment.
2. For cooks to understand their role, in the context of the 'Division of Responsibility', during a mealtime and not feel a sense of responsibility when children refuse to eat.
3. For cooks to know how to respond to children who don't want to eat the meal.
4. For cooks to feel empowered to make changes to their menus and communicate this with the educators and directors at the centre.

Session 2 Summary

Mini PD Session 2 explored fussy eating in the long day care environment, including:

- What fussy eating is in young children, in the context of early childhood development, and why some children are fussy with food and mealtimes
- How addressing fussy eating is a whole-of-service approach, and not a job for one person
- Practical strategies to implement during the menu planning and cooking process, and alternative ways of presenting food during mealtimes
- Understand what responsive feeding and the division of responsibility are and how these feeding styles can be incorporated into mealtimes in the long day care setting
- The importance of mealtime routine and structure for young children and the importance of positive role modelling from cooks and educators
- How we use our senses when eating and trying new foods and how some children may need more time when learning to try new foods
- Why pressuring children to eat does not work long term and some alternative conversation points to have with children during mealtimes.

Supporting resources

Remember there are several resources available to help you assess your menu using FoodChecker and implement the *Menu planning guidelines for long day care*. See links below:

- [Introducing new foods to children](#)
- [Introducing new foods to children - video series](#)
- [Cooking with kids](#)
- [Healthy eating games & activities](#)
- [VegKit Taste & Learn for Early Years](#)

Q&A session

In addition to the suggested questions and prompts listed under each activity above, some general questions you can ask to facilitate discussion with the group, following the presentation and activities, include:

1. How common is fussy eating at your centre?
2. Do you find it more common in some rooms/age groups?
3. Does your centre currently have any strategies or policies in place to manage fussy eating?
4. What is something you have learnt today about fussy eating that you weren't aware of?
5. What are some strategies you have learnt today which you could implement at your centre?

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Managing and supporting fussy eating can feel challenging, for everyone involved. Cooks can often feel frustrated or disappointed when children refuse to eat the meal provided. It's important to reassure cooks that it is not their sole responsibility to ensure each child is eating. With the information provided in this professional development session, you may have some additional follow up questions to the strategies provided. We've covered a few of these below.

What if a child does not eat the food provided?

It is common for families, cooks, and educators to feel concerned when a child refuses to eat a meal. Remember, as a cook, it is your role to provide children with nutritious food during set snack and mealtimes. It is not your role, or the role of an educator, to make a child eat the food offered. A child will decide how much they want to eat and whether they eat at all. Not all toddlers and children will eat the same amount every day. It is normal for them to eat larger portions one day and smaller portions the next. It is more helpful to look at their overall food intake for the week instead of focusing on each meal or day. More extreme displays of fussy eating should always be raised with the child's parents or carers. Children who display extreme food restrictions will need the help and support of health professionals including a GP, paediatrician, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, dietitian, and/or psychologist.

If a child is hungry enough, will they eat what is provided?

For a small percentage of young children, eating and mealtimes can be challenging and distressing, and going hungry will feel like a much better option for them. For those children whose eating is impacted by medical issues, gastrointestinal problems (constipation, reflux), allergies and intolerances, sensory processing challenges, developmental delays, and even cognitive delays, eating may feel more harmful than enjoyable. Some young children with neurodiversity, such as autism and ADHD, also find mealtimes particularly overwhelming. Children who display extreme food restrictions should not be ignored or labelled as 'behaviourally challenging'. It's important to raise these concerns with the children's parents or carers for appropriate follow up and intervention. Many of the strategies discussed in this professional development session will support the needs of children who find mealtimes and eating particularly challenging.

Why is it okay for children to make a mess while eating?

Learning to eat and feed with independence is an important stage of development. Children are developing their fine motor skills and muscle coordination, as well as learning about the taste, texture, smell, and temperature of food. Children naturally want to explore and experiment with food which might involve squashing, throwing, and feeling the different textures of food. The stimulation children get from feeling different foods and learning to eat also helps with brain development. This process will involve mess. Allowing children to use their senses to explore food at mealtimes can be very enjoyable and help them build a positive relationship with food.

Seek feedback

It is helpful to collect feedback from participants on their experiences of the professional development session to evaluate the effectiveness of the topic and the usefulness for the cooks. This data can also be helpful to include in your reporting requirements to demonstrate impact of your cooks network.

- Use our Cooks Connect [Professional Development Survey](#) template

Provide acknowledgement

Use the HEAS branded certificate of completion to acknowledge and reward cooks for participating in the professional development session. You may also like to co-brand this with your organisation. Encourage them to display it in their centre or share with their manager.

- Download [Cooks Connect Certificate of Completion](#)

For more support and resources

For more support or advice regarding your cooks network, implementing the *Menu planning guidelines for long day care*, using FoodChecker, contact the Healthy Eating Advisory Service on:

- HEAS Infoline - 1300 22 52 88
- HEAS email - heas@nutritionaustralia.org.au.

More resources can be found on the HEAS website: <https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/>.

Free training modules for cooks and educators can be found here:

<https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/training-programs/>

To receive this document in an accessible format phone 1300 22 52 88
or email heas@nutritionaustralia.org.au

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