

d. Specific areas where the Government should focus its efforts (Policy Priorities)

1. Specific areas for Government should focus are ECEC settings, especially centre-based childcare, and Family Day Care (FDC) and nutrition, because:

- Over 900, 000 children less than 5 years old are in childcare in Australia.
- Most children are in centre-based childcare, spending on average 30 hrs plus per week.
- While in childcare children can receive up to two-thirds of their daily nutrition because most centres provide lunch and three mid-meals, with an increasing number also providing breakfast and/or dinner as workforce schedules change (shift work, casual work) particularly for women.
- Figures are not available, but from the ECEC sector, most centres provide meals and mid-meals cooked on site from fresh ingredients by a cook or chef (Matwiejczyk et al., 2021).
- Hence, childcare services reach the majority of children and their families and are the setting where children's food preferences and food patterns are being established, many for life
- Where once the family table was the main influencer, the childcare setting now is for many children.
- From the research we know that we are failing children and their families around nutrition. More than 40% of young children's total energy intake is from discretionary foods (Johnston et al 2016), and 1 in 4 children are carrying excessive weight which most will not outgrow. This weight will contribute to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and it is NCDs which result in significant morbidity and pre-mature mortality (ABS, 2022).
- We are not only failing children and families in general with nutrition, but also perpetuating inequities for children born into or living with disadvantaged. Experts agree that according to the data, there is a social gradient where children and families living in areas of disadvantage have much higher rates of diet-related NCDs and risk factors, are more likely to be carrying excessive weight and eat less healthily (albeit, only 3% of the Australian population meet the Australian Dietary Guideline recommendations).
- These inequities can also be correlated with centres and areas children live in. According to Australian Early Development Census, for example, SA children living in the most disadvantaged communities are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those living in least disadvantaged communities (33.8% cf 16%), and the extent of this disparity is increasing over the years (Dept. Education 2022). When reviewing any data investigating children's health, developmental and educational outcomes with socioeconomic status indicators and socioeconomic indicators for area (SEIFA), there is a clear gradient where children living with disadvantage are significantly worse off. In a Qsld study, triangulating this data with ECEC services and types of food provision clearly showed further disparities (Thorpe et al., 2022). Further studies investigating ECEC food provision and disadvantage support this (Searle et al., 2022a, 2022b).
- The extent with which we are meeting children's nutritional needs in Australian ECEC settings is not equally or fairly distributed but even more damning, is that we are not meeting the **child's rights to healthy food** for development, nor for the prevention of NCDs and malnutrition (overweight, obesity), according to Article 24, in the UN Charter of the Rights of the Child (Unicef 1989), to which Australia is a signatory (Matwiejczyk, 2020).
- Research taking a child rights approach in 2020, found that ECEC services and State Parties, including State and Commonwealth, were not fulfilling their obligations under Article 24 specified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Matwiejczyk 2020).

What the research shows

- From the research we know that centre-based childcare recognise nutrition in partnership with children as very important. However, there is a paucity of studies investigating to what extent centres provide healthy food environments and food provision (Matwiejczyk et al., 2018; Yoong et al., 2021; can provide other refs). For example, no lunchbox provided centres meet expectations for healthy foods (Matwiejczyk 2018).
- From the research we also know that interventions to support centres around nutrition work and have positive outcomes for children, but this diminishes unless supported externally by researchers (as part of a study) or government investment with external expertise/support (Matwiejczyk et al., 2018).
- An investigation interviewing ECEC directors, cooks and key decision- makers in 2020 (Matwiejczyk 2020) also showed that State Parties and centres are not fulfilling their obligations thru the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (P. 7 Early Start Strategy discussion paper) re Article 24 where it is the right of the child to have healthy food and health-promoting food environments to prevent NCDs and address overweight/obesity.
- Consensus is that centres are keen to support children and their families thru nutrition but do not have the resources, means or State Parties support to do this (Matwiejczyk et al., 2021; Matwiejczyk 2020).
- **Focusing Government efforts on the ECEC sector and nutrition and making this a policy priority would bring significant benefits and positive outcomes for children and their families, and to those who support them.**

2. Five strategies that the Commonwealth could do to improve outcomes for children-particularly those born or raised in more disadvantaged circumstances

1. Provide universal access to free or heavily subsidised food prepared on-site in centre-based child care. Countries such as France, Japan and some Scandinavian countries already do this with positive child outcomes. Japan is the only country which has arrested childhood obesity rates, according to recent FAO results of international childhood obesity levels, and attributes this to their nutrition initiatives in childcare, pre-schools and junior school. This would be achieved by funding centres for cook/chefs' salaries and for the food.

At a minimum, the Commonwealth could support a similar, successful initiative in the US. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal program that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children and adults who are enrolled for care at participating child care centres and family day care homes.

Centres have proven that they can do this with positive child and family outcomes. They have the existing infrastructure, and this just needs to be built upon and strengthened. This initiative also addresses one of the most influential determinants of food choice in children which is modernity and time -poverty for families, which are still the greatest determinants of developing food preferences and dietary patterns.

2. Provide funded state-wide ECEC initiatives/interventions supporting food environments and food provision in every jurisdiction (State and Territories) across Australia and that these are responsive to the diversity of local needs across the whole jurisdiction

Only three jurisdictions within Australia provide free government supported state-wide healthy eating support services for ECEC settings (NSW, Victoria, Tasmania). For the other states and territories, access to free resources is patchy, online and passive. When viewed thru the equity lens,

national generic resources do not address existing gaps and needs and are not equally relevant to all services. Moreover, paid services are prohibitively costly to most centres wanting to access support.

The Commonwealth can improve child and family outcomes by funding *all* states and territories for initiatives/interventions supporting food environments and food provision.

- See the [National Nutrition Network \(2022\) Policy Brief — 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 - Early Childhood Education and Care \[NNN-ECEC\], 2022a\)](#)

3. Provide funded state-wide ECEC initiatives/interventions supporting food environments and food provision in every jurisdiction (State and Territories) to address *inequities* in service provision and resources and focus on children born or raised in more disadvantaged circumstances.

Although providing services equally across all jurisdictions would provide opportunities for all, it is not enough to address the inequalities experienced by many children, parents, carers and communities accessing the ECEC sector.

We know from reports and research that the following groups need ECEC support services which are not only equally accessed but equitable as well

- Children and families accessing ECEC services in low SES, rural and regional locations. The *Dropping Off the Edge Report* (2021) shows a persistent number of locations in each state and territory where disadvantage is experienced with poorer outcomes. This is reflected in ADEC findings, where in SA, children living in the most disadvantaged communities are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those living in least disadvantaged communities (33.8% cf 16%), and this figure is increasing over the years (Dept. Education 2022). Searle et al., (2023, 2022 and Thorpe et al., (2022) have also published disparities between food provision and feeding practices in socially disadvantaged centres in Queensland. Families are also experiencing increasing experiences of food insecurity (Foodbank Hunger Report 2022) which some centres are addressing (Matwiejczyk et al., 2021). The Commonwealth is being called to not only provide funded support services equally but also in areas of particular disadvantage.
 - See the [National Nutrition Network \(2022\) Evidence Brief — 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 - Early Childhood Education and Care [NNN-ECEC], 2022b)
- Around a third of all children using ECEC services and formal childcare are aged 6weeks-two years. Nutrition related guidance, support, policies and legislation supporting infants and very young children attending childcare services is lagging and ambiguous (McGuire et al., 2018; 2020). The Commonwealth can improve outcomes for this vulnerable group by increasing educator knowledge, efficacy and agency in infant and young children feeding.
- There is also a need to rebalance the focus on all key staff in ECEC settings, particularly cooks where children and families benefit from their commitment I ECEC services to provide safe, nutritious and health promoting foods. To date the focus has been on educators but cooks are struggling to meet increasing demands for cooked meals from families without the necessary system-level support and training (Matwiejczyk et al., 2018).

4. Collect relevant and consistent data on food provision in ECEC services through existing mechanisms and embedding this in current management or assessment and rating systems.

There is a lack of relevant data available identifying what food service provision type is provided across Australia. This means that we can not identify existing and actual gaps and needs, we overlook key staff (eg cooks) and different types of food environments, we overlook an important partnership and role with parents/carers around food and we burden educators with nutrition related tasks and requirements not suited to their role. Moreover, we have a doubling up of interventions without sharing. Collecting data and providing open access to the database would address these concerns.

- See the [National Nutrition Network \(2022\) Policy Brief — 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.](#) (*National Nutrition Network - Early Childhood Education and Care [NNN-ECEC], 2022c*)

5. Provide supports, training and resources for ECEC educators, cooks and the sector to build their capability and capacity to support children and families around nutrition.

Current guides and resources are out-of-date and do not reflect the changing landscape around nutrition in ECEC settings. The national Get Up & Grow resources available to all states and territory centres for example were developed in 2013 and do not reflect the most recent nutrition evidence nor address the current determinants of food choice that constrain children, parents and ECEC staff food making-decisions. Resources also are not co-developed with parents and ECEC sector and children's voices or parents and ECEC staffs lived experience is not included.

The Commonwealth can improve outcomes for children around nutrition by increasing individual capacity and efficacy thru

- Appropriate training across Australia that includes the ECEC sector in co-designing training initiatives and is led by the ECEC sector.
- Development of national, evidence-based guidelines, guides, resources and tools in partnership with the ECEC sector, health sector, parents/carers.
- Strengthening of certificate qualifications for ECEC educators and cooks thru TAFE and Universities
- National minimum qualification requirements for cooks (ranges from zero to a Cert 111).
- See the [National Nutrition Network \(2022\) Policy Brief - A Call to update the National Get Up and Grow guidelines and associated resources.](#) (*National Nutrition Network - Early Childhood Education and Care [NNN-ECEC], 2022d*)

e. What principles should underpin this Strategy?

- Those principles enshrined in the UN Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989)
- Community participation including co-design, co-creation, co-development with parents/carers and ECEC sector.
- Inclusion of a diverse range of people within this
- The inclusion of parents/carers. Educators and other ECEC personnels' lived experience, with lived experience informing developments.
- Inclusion of children's voice
- An understanding that all the determinants of food choice need to be addressed (not just knowledge and skills gaps) and included in considerations.

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