

More Than a Mealtime

Evaluation Findings from Mealtime Expectations

Better Health Network

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we live and work, and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise the enduring knowledge and practices that connect food, family, culture and storytelling, and honour the ways these connections continue to strengthen communities.



This report was prepared by Better Health Network and Rooftop Social. We would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their contribution to the development of this report.

We extend our sincere thanks to the Early Childhood Education and Care staff, service leaders and families who created space for reflection, shared their experiences and demonstrated a willingness to question long-held assumptions about food, eating and mealtimes. Your commitment to learning and continuous improvement made this work possible.

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“I am really proud of where we are and what we have achieved”
- Director

Executive Summary

Mealtime Expectations is a health promotion initiative that works with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services and families to create positive food environments that support children's relationships with food and their bodies.

The evaluation found that Mealtime Expectations created opportunities for ECEC staff, families and sector partners to look beyond children's eating behaviours and examine the beliefs, expectations and practices shaping children's experiences of food and eating. Following project implementation, ECEC staff reported greater clarity about their role during mealtimes, increased confidence communicating with families and more consistent approaches across services. Families described feeling less pressure around feeding, greater confidence in responding to their child's needs and a stronger understanding of responsive approaches to eating. Together, these changes shifted attention away from monitoring how much children ate, towards creating positive mealtime environments. With this, services and families described children as experiencing calmer and more connected mealtimes, greater autonomy around eating and increased confidence in responding to their own hunger and fullness cues.

The evaluation also found that Mealtime Expectations influenced policy, practice and partnerships beyond participating services. Implementation insights informed policy reform, strengthened sector partnerships and contributed practice-based evidence to broader discussions about children's food environments.

Mealtime Expectations created opportunities for people to reflect on the assumptions shaping children's food environments and align their practices more closely with their intentions and values. The evaluation suggests that the project's greatest contribution to health promotion practice is not a set of resources or activities, but an approach to health promotion that combines reflection, collaboration, evidence-informed learning and responsiveness to local contexts. These learnings have relevance far beyond mealtimes and offer valuable insights for practitioners working to create sustainable change in complex systems.

Foreword

The early years matter.

The relationships, experiences and environments that surround children during these formative years have a profound influence on their lifelong health and wellbeing. We know that children learn not only from what they are taught, but from what they see, experience and observe every day. The attitudes, behaviours and expectations modelled by the adults around them help shape their understanding of food, their bodies and their sense of self.

This report represents the culmination of several years of learning, testing, reflecting and adapting. Mealtime Expectations has evolved considerably over time, shaped by the experiences of educators, families and children, and refined through a commitment to listening, learning and responding to what communities told us they needed. Rather than implementing a fixed program, the project remained flexible and responsive, adapting as new insights emerged and local contexts evolved.

What makes this work particularly significant is its willingness to challenge assumptions. Through a deeply intersectional lens, informed by size-inclusive practice and an understanding of the social determinants of health, the project encouraged participants to look beyond children's eating behaviours and consider the broader influences shaping their experiences of food and eating.

Importantly, this evaluation demonstrates that meaningful change is often created through process as much as outcome. Collaboration, reflective practice, evidence-informed learning and responsiveness to local context were not simply project principles; they were the mechanisms through which change occurred. The findings offer valuable lessons not only for supporting positive food environments, but for health promotion practice more broadly.

I would like to sincerely thank the early childhood education and care services, service leaders, educators and families who contributed to this work. Your openness, honesty and willingness to reflect on long-held beliefs made this project possible. The trust you placed in the process, and in one another, has created a body of work that will continue to influence practice, policy and thinking well beyond the life of this project.

I am incredibly proud of the Better Health Network Health Promotion team and our partners for their leadership, innovation and commitment to doing this work. This report demonstrates what is possible when we work alongside communities, remain curious, and create space for learning together.



Chief Executive Officer
Better Health Network

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Glossary

Body trust
The belief that children can learn to recognise and respond to their own hunger, fullness and appetite cues when supported in a positive eating environment.

Co-design
A collaborative process in which those affected by an issue are actively involved in developing solutions, resources or actions.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)
Kindergartens and long day care services.

ECEC staff
Inclusive of Centre Director, Early Childhood Teachers, Educators, Educational Leaders and Nominated Supervisors.

Evidence-informed learning
A process of learning that combines research evidence, professional expertise and lived experience to inform decision-making and practice.

Diet Culture
A system of beliefs that values thinness and weight control, shaping social norms, institutions and health practices. Diet culture often reinforces weight stigma and body hierarchies and has roots in broader systems of oppression, including racism, patriarchy and ableism.

Lived experience
Knowledge and insights gained through personal experience.

Mealtime Value Statements
A set of shared values and principles co-developed by ECEC staff and families to guide mealtime practices within an ECEC service.

Ob*sity
An asterisk is used to acknowledge the stigma often associated with this term and to encourage critical reflection on body size language. Original terminology is retained when directly citing published literature.

Positive food environment
An environment that supports positive relationships with food and eating through trust, respect, autonomy and social connection.

Practice-based evidence
Knowledge and learning generated through real-world implementation and practice.

Project team
Health promotion practitioners including a Senior Health Promotion Officer and Health Promotion Officer. Responsible for delivering Mealtime Expectations.

Reflective practice
A process of critically examining experiences, beliefs, assumptions and practices to support learning and improvement.

Responsive feeding
An approach to feeding where adults provide the structure, time and food, while children decide whether and how much to eat.

Size-inclusive practice
An approach that promotes health and wellbeing for people of all body sizes without making assumptions based on body weight or appearance.

Weight-centric approach
An approach that views body weight as the primary indicator of health and places significant emphasis on weight-related outcomes when assessing or promoting health and wellbeing.





About Mealtime Expectations

About the Mealtime Expectations project

Mealtime Expectations aims to create mealtime environments that support all children to develop a positive and respectful relationship with food and their bodies. Developed by Better Health Network in partnership with ECEC services, the project recognises that children's experiences of food and eating is complex, shaped by the beliefs, expectations and practices of the adults around them.

Early childhood (ages 2-5 years) provides an opportunity to support children to develop a positive relationship with food and their bodies[i]. Learning to eat a variety of foods is a skill built over time with each child learning at their own pace. Positive and developmentally appropriate food experiences and caregiver role modelling, support children to learn to eat and develop a positive relationship with food[ii].

Across the ECEC sector, ECEC services are guided by key legislation, frameworks and regulatory bodies[iii], "healthy eating" initiatives and evidence-based recommendations, often from multiple sources.



While these resources are developed with positive intentions, translating them into everyday practice has many barriers[iv]. There is often limited time and opportunity to critically reflect on how these policies, programs and evidence are interpreted and applied in practice.

Mealtime Expectations helps to bridge this gap, working directly with ECEC staff and families to understand, reflect and co-create change.

Mealtime Expectations 2022-2025

9 ECEC services
- 5 Kindergartens
- 4 Long Day Care Centres

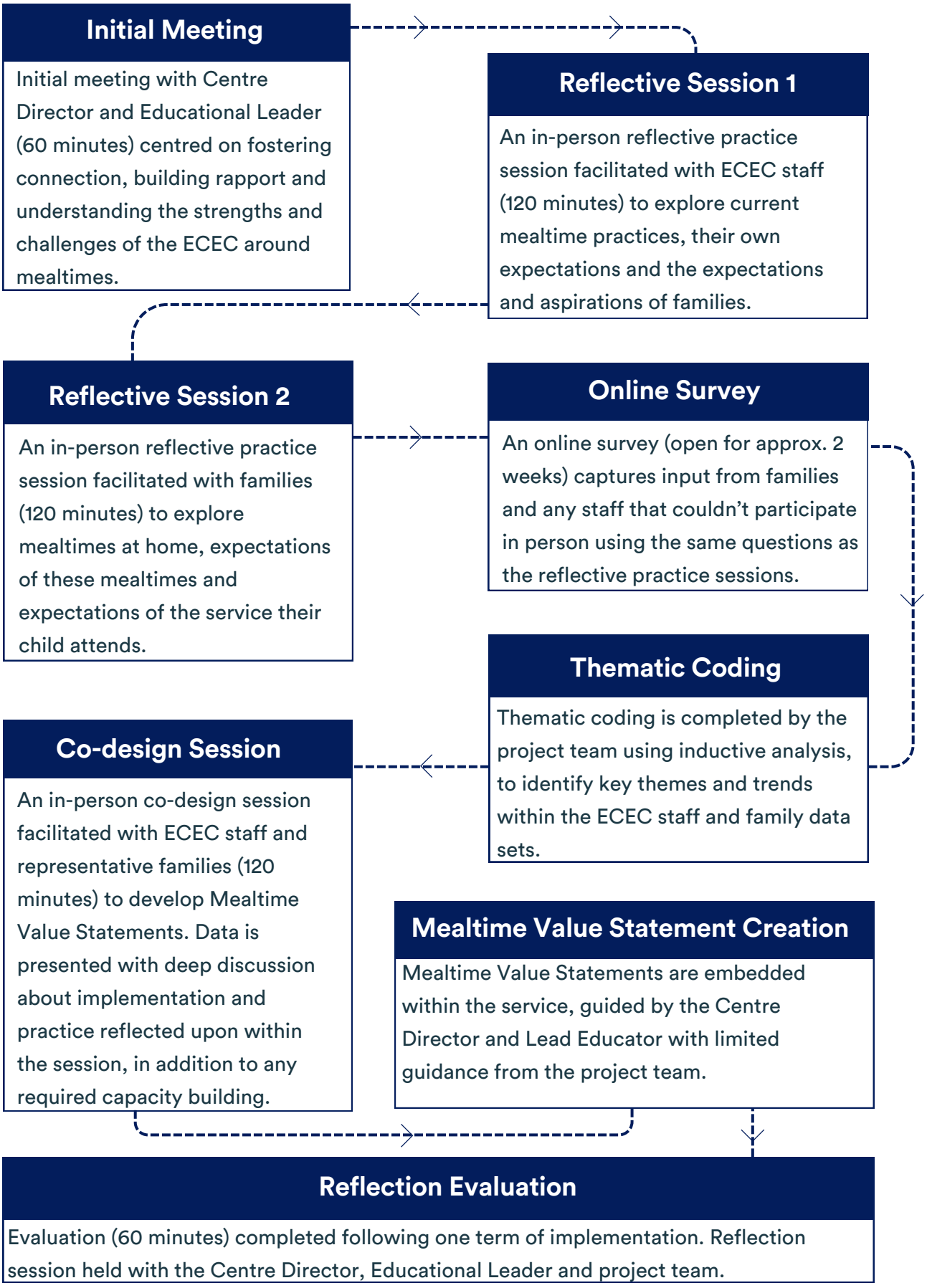
16 reflective practice + **9** co-design sessions

132 ECEC staff **241** parents/carers participated in reflective practice sessions and online surveying

Total project reach

765 children **216** ECEC staff

Mealtime Expectations Process



How did Mealtime Expectations reframe mealtime challenges?

A key finding of the evaluation was that mealtime challenges services were seeking to address, were often not driven by children's eating behaviours alone. While services commonly joined the project with concerns about fussy eating or stressful mealtimes, implementation revealed that these concerns were often shaped by broader beliefs, expectations, routines and systems influencing children's food environments.

Through the project, services were able to develop a clearer understanding of the factors driving mealtime challenges within their context. ECEC staff frequently returned to concerns about whether children were eating "too much" or "too little", how to ensure children were healthy, and what their role should be during mealtimes. Participants identified unintended consequences of well-intentioned practices, including children feeling pressure around eating or becoming anxious at mealtimes.

Mealtime Expectations created opportunities for ECEC services and families to better understand the nature of the challenges they were experiencing and what was driving them. Conversations shifted away from changing children's behaviour, towards examining the expectations, assumptions and adult responses shaping children's experiences of food and eating. Across services, each identified local challenges, priorities and opportunities for change, highlighting that there was no single problem for the project to solve or standard solution to replicate across a range of services.



This was an important finding for both the project and health promotion practice more broadly, learning that **the problem or solution doesn't need to be defined prior to implementation** and that there is value in spending time defining a problem alongside community, before attempting to solve it.



"We noticed less anxiety around mealtimes at home too. She stopped saying 'I have to finish my plate'. That was a big moment for us."

- Mother

About the evaluation

The evaluation of Mealtime Expectations was led by the BHN Health Promotion team, with the support of Rooftop Social. An initial workshop was facilitated in March 2026, with five health promotion practitioners present including the two project team members. Practitioners were supported to develop a Theory of Change (see appendix), and evaluation and data synthesis capacity. The team worked to interpret outcomes of the project and understand **how** these outcomes were achieved.

Coaching sessions with the project team developed coding and data synthesis understanding to interpret outcomes of the project's Key Evaluation Questions.



Key Evaluation Questions (KEQ)

KEQ One

To what extent does Mealtime Expectations achieve outcomes for ECEC services, including ECEC staff, families and children?

KEQ Two

To what extent does Mealtime Expectations achieve outcomes for the ECEC sector? and how has Mealtime Expectations added to the evidence base (practice-based evidence)?

KEQ Three

How does Mealtime Expectations achieve outcomes?

KEQ Four

How has Mealtime Expectations evolved to meet the needs of ECEC services?

KEQ Five

What are appropriate next steps for Mealtime Expectations with improvements, sustainability and scale?

Evaluation data sources

This evaluation was informed by practice-based evidence generated throughout the implementation of Mealtime Expectations, in addition to qualitative interviews with parents by Rooftop Social. Data was collected from ECEC staff, families, service leaders and the project team through a range of activities, providing insight into project outcomes, implementation and enablers. The matrix below summarises the data sources used and their contribution to each KEQ.

Data source	KEQ 1	KEQ 2	KEQ 3	KEQ 4	KEQ 5
ECEC service reflective practice staff data				●	
Project team observation data			●	●	
Project team Mealtime Expectations journal				●	
Post implementation reflection session	●	●	●	●	●
Mealtime Expectations filming transcript			●	●	
Qualitative interviews with parents	●		●		●
Interviews with the project team		●		●	●

Limitations

Family perspectives were not evenly represented across participating services.
Participation in reflective practice sessions, interviews and co-design activities was voluntary, and families who chose to engage may have had a greater interest in children's eating, wellbeing and mealtime practices than the broader family cohort at each service. Positive outcomes for families were most evident among those who actively participated in project activities, with these families demonstrating a stronger understanding of the service's mealtime approach and the principles underpinning it. As a result, the findings may provide a more comprehensive picture of the experiences and outcomes of highly engaged families than of the wider family population across participating services.

Opportunities to collect children's perspectives were limited.
While ECEC staff and family perspectives provided important insights into implementation and outcomes, future evaluation would benefit from incorporating developmentally appropriate methods to better understand children's experiences of mealtimes and any changes associated with the project.



Key Findings

Mealtime Expectations achieved meaningful outcomes for ECEC staff, families and children. Through reflective practice, co-design and the development of Mealtime Value Statements, ECEC staff developed a clearer understanding of their role during mealtimes, families reported greater confidence and reduced anxiety around feeding, and services established more consistent approaches to mealtimes. These changes influenced how adults talked about food, responded to children, and communicated with one another about children's eating. As a result, mealtime environments became calmer, more consistent and less focused on monitoring children's food intake, with ECEC staff and families observing children experienced greater autonomy, less pressure around eating and more positive mealtime experiences. The findings did not determine if Mealtime Expectations changed a child's food consumption directly, however it shifted the environment around children, creating the conditions for more positive experiences of food and eating.



ECEC staff became clearer about their role

ECEC staff became clearer about their role

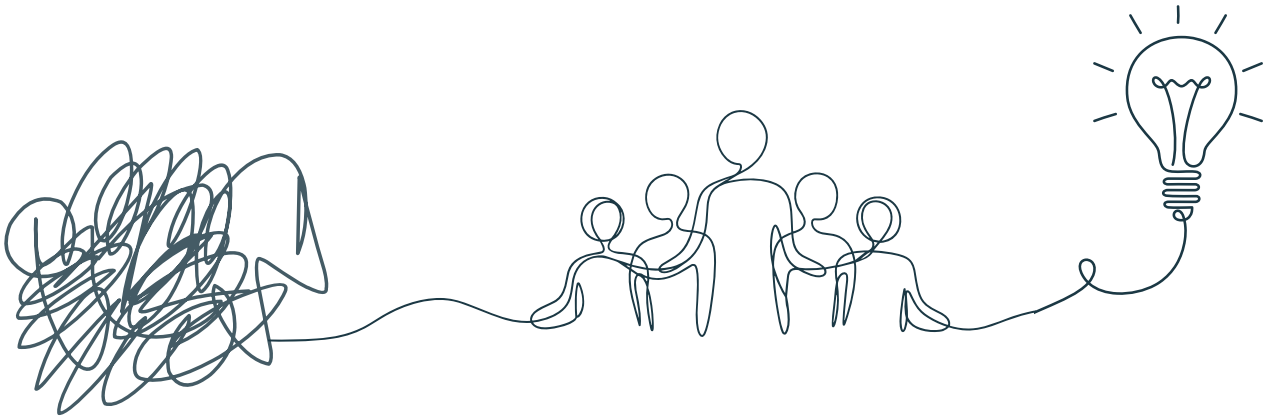
Prior to implementing Mealtime Expectations, ECEC staff consistently described mealtimes as one of the most stressful parts of the day. ECEC staff spoke about feeling a strong sense of responsibility for children's wellbeing and often felt accountable for ensuring children had eaten enough throughout the day. These concerns were shaped both by ECEC staff's own beliefs and expectations about food and health, and by uncertainty about how families would perceive their child's eating at the service. Conversations with families at pick-up frequently centred on what and how much children had eaten, reinforcing a focus on monitoring food intake. Alongside managing busy, noisy and sometimes chaotic mealtime environments, ECEC staff described feeling caught between supporting children's individual needs and meeting the families' expectations about eating. As a result, mealtimes often became focused on monitoring, encouraging or reporting children's eating, rather than on the broader mealtime experience.

Through reflective practice and implementation of the Mealtime Value Statements, ECEC staff reflected on their role during mealtimes, recognising that their responsibility was not to monitor children's eating (beyond safety needs), but to create environments that supported body trust and positive relationships with food.

Research Insights

While each person's relationship with food is unique, a positive relationship with food generally looks like:

- Having positive or neutral attitudes about food and eating. For example, feeling calm when eating (not experiencing guilt or negative emotions)[v].
- Food acceptance, including feeling comfortable with food, flexible with food choices and able to learn to like new foods[v].
- Intuitively eating by listening and responding to your body's cues around hunger, satiety and what it needs in that moment[vi].



Language shifts

"The language educators are using during mealtimes has shifted from 'making healthy choices/brain food/eating the colours of the rainbow' to non-judgmental words."
– Educator

The evaluation highlighted that ECEC staff moved away from pressure-based or food-moralising language, including phrases such as “eat your healthy food first”, “good lunchbox” and “sometimes food”. While often used with positive intent, this language can unintentionally reinforce binary ideas about "good" and "bad" foods and position some eating behaviours as more desirable than others. Evidence suggests that food-related messages are often shaped by broader moral values, where food choices can become associated with ideas of being "good", "responsible" or "healthy", and where eating certain foods may contribute to feelings of guilt, shame or failure[vii,viii]. Through Mealtime Expectations, ECEC staff recognised that everyday language can shape children's developing relationships with food and bodies, highlighting the importance of responsive, non-judgemental communication during mealtimes[ix].

"The main thing I recall shifting was the way [the ECEC service] communicated to us about the way the kids sort of expressed feelings of satiety. For example, you know, they used to say servings and have a number value next to it, but instead they then were shifting towards '[Child] expressed a sensation of fullness' or something a bit more qualitative." – Parent

Food monitoring

Following implementation, ECEC staff described supporting children to notice hunger and fullness cues, without needing adult approval or judgement.

“There is a trusting relationship with families regarding educators not ‘policing’ how much their child had eaten during the day. Staff are nonjudgmental on what food is packed during the day.”
– Director

"We no longer hear 'you need to eat this first' [from other educators to children]."
– Educator

Family communication

A clearer understanding of ECEC staff’s role also strengthened communication with families, with ECEC staff having reported feeling more confident with explaining the service’s approach to mealtimes, responding to family questions, and moving conversations away from reporting how much a child had eaten.

“Educator confidence with seeing the approach in reality. Feel they can confidently answer questions from families. Helped guide conversations during orientation.”
– Educator

“Staff are now clearer on expectations and feel better equipped to talk with families about eating habits, food intake, and children’s autonomy during mealtimes.”
– Educator

As a result of ECEC staff being clearer about their role and shared Mealtime Value Statements, staff reflected that there was greater consistency of practice across services. ECEC staff described that the project led to an agreed approach across rooms, reducing variation in practice and helping new staff understand the service's philosophy from the outset.

Together, these changes created a stronger foundation for positive mealtime environments. When ECEC staff shared a common understanding of their role, communicated consistently with families, and had greater consistency of practice across the service, mealtimes became more predictable, calmer, supportive and positive for children.

"To honestly say today that we have genuinely embedded Mealtime Expectations across the board is phenomenal for us. We are all on the same page... It has become part of our curriculum"
– Director

Hear what our ECEC staff had to say



"Nothing has ever stuck with us like working with you."
- Director



Families became more confident

Families became more confident

Families who participated in Mealtime Expectations described increased confidence in supporting their children's eating and adopting more responsive approaches at home. Families identified that the knowledge, reflection and practical strategies gained through the project supported them to reduce pressure around eating, involve children in food preparation, and respond more flexibly to individual needs. The evaluation noted key changes in family behaviour, with ECEC staff reporting a reduction in both families checking lunchboxes immediately on pick-up, and conversations centred on children's food consumption.

Challenging beliefs

For many families, changes required challenging long-held beliefs and practices shaped by their own childhood experiences, cultural expectations and concerns about nutrition. Reflective practice created opportunities for families to examine where these expectations came from and whether they aligned with the needs of their child. For some families, this resulted in a transition towards more responsive approaches to feeding their children, normalising trust, flexibility and meeting their child's needs.

"I come from the generation where we were forcing him. I was worried about his nutrition. I've seen what they do at [ECEC service]. So now if he hasn't eaten what I've served him, I'll put his food on his little table and he'll come back and forth. So I've become more lenient seeing what they do at [ECEC service]."
– Parent

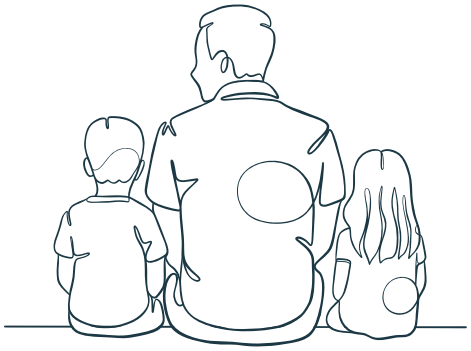
Practical strategies

Families also highlighted the value of practical strategies and peer learning within reflective practice sessions, praising the opportunity to learn not only from the project team, but also from hearing the lived experiences of other parents navigating similar challenges. This combination of professional guidance and peer learning helped parents develop practical approaches to supporting their children's eating, while also increasing awareness of appropriate referral pathways where additional support was needed.

"I've definitely stopped pushing them as hard to eat things. One of the [project team] spoke about safe foods, and I thought that was interesting. For [child], his safe food is broccoli."
– Parent

"There was talk about food aversions and it helped to confirm for me that [child] had a little bit of that."
– Parent

"We have noticed a massive decline in families checking lunchboxes at pick-up time."
– Educator



Motherhood pressure and guilt

“Shame came up a lot in the group…Our relationship with food, and parenting and being a good mum and a woman.”
– Mother

An important and unanticipated finding was the extent to which the reflective practice sessions created space for parents, particularly mothers, to explore the emotional and social pressures associated with feeding children. Mothers described feelings of guilt, responsibility and pressure to "get feeding right", recognising how these expectations had shaped their own approaches to food and parenting.

For some mothers, they noted that hearing similar experiences from other mothers helped normalise these feelings and reduced the sense of isolation often associated with feeding challenges.

These findings suggest that the reflective practice process offered families, especially **mothers**, more than practical feeding strategies or additional nutrition information. It created a psychologically safe environment where parents could examine the social norms, expectations and deeply held beliefs that shaped their approaches to food, feeding and mealtimes.

"As mothers, I can say that because I am one, it is ingrained from us as the day you give birth, feed, feed your child. You know, we go to all of these weigh-ins at the maternal nurse and oh my gosh, are you feeding them enough? And oh, I breastfed my children. You know, are they in this percentile and oh my gosh, I'm not breastfeeding enough and I'm exhausted and now I've got a pump and oh my gosh, the guilt of the formula. And so like not only us again, as a female, I've grown up being health conscious and body conscious and all of these things. And now it's like, shit, now I've got to worry about feeding this child and am I doing enough? So that was also really an interesting concept that we unpacked.
– Mother

"It was interesting because everyone brought their own problems… their hang-ups, because food is such a massive thing."
– Mother

" I think as parents or as a mother, we put so much pressure on ourselves and society does too, you know, do every single thing possible. So I think it was really, it gave us confidence that you don't have to be perfect in all areas."
– Mother

Research Insights

This finding aligns with broader evidence that describes feeding as highly gendered work, where responsibility for children's eating is often placed on mothers and closely linked to social expectations of being a "good mother". Research has identified that for mothers, feeding can be a source of guilt, anxiety and emotional labour, particularly when mothers perceive they are not meeting expectations around feeding and children's health[x,xi].

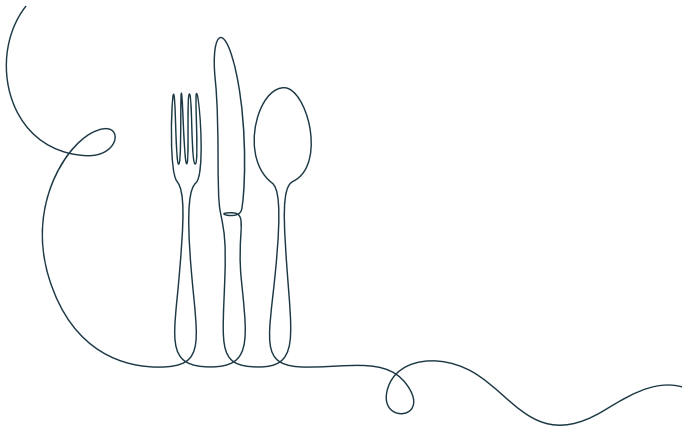


Children became calmer and more autonomous during mealtimes

Children became calmer and more autonomous during mealtimes

Across participating services, following implementation, children were described as experiencing calmer, more connected mealtime environments, with increased opportunities to recognise hunger and fullness cues and engage socially with peers and ECEC staff. These changes were not as a result of direct efforts by ECEC staff or families to change children's eating behaviour, but emerged through shifts in adult expectations and mealtime practices, alongside changes to the broader mealtime environment. As ECEC staff and families reduced pressure, monitoring and judgement, children were given greater opportunities to listen to and respond to their own needs around eating.

With this, the project did not measure success through the quantity of food children consumed. Instead, services identified changes in children's confidence with eating and trying new foods, alongside their comfort and relationship with food, as important indicators of progress.



Trusting and learning body cues

"And say he doesn't eat the meals I've given him. I've noticed now that because I'm not forcing him, he does come and grab my hand. He's telling me he's hungry. Because a lot of my anxiety was 'how will I know?' From [service], he's learnt how to communicate with me that he's hungry."
– Parent

“He will eat the sandwich first, or he might eat the fruit first, he doesn’t have to check with an educator. He knows his body best.”
– Parent

"There is little to no permission-seeking from the children about what they can eat or in which order"
– Educator

A key finding was that when pressure, monitoring and judgement were reduced by the adults around children, the children appeared more confident to trust their own internal hunger, fullness and ‘had-enough’ cues, and make independent decisions about when to finish eating. ECEC staff and families described children becoming less reliant on adult reassurance or permission-seeking around food, with greater confidence in communicating their needs and making choices about what and how much they ate.

Calmer children

ECEC staff and families reported noticeable changes in children's behaviour during mealtimes, describing children as calmer, more engaged and more comfortable participating in shared social mealtimes. ECEC staff and families constantly referenced how relaxed children have become since the project, noticing the shift in the stress and rush within the room during mealtimes.

"Children are no longer finishing their lunchboxes by 10am, instead they are relaxing into the day and joining in on the set mealtimes"
– Educator

"He has a more relaxed approach to food. It [Mealtime Expectations] definitely has helped."
– Parent

"Children have adapted quickly – children really calm."
– Educator

"We had a very anxious child in our 4-year-old program...It was slow, we needed to be patient, we got the family on board too and within 6 months the child was trying all foods and her attitude to food had completely changed. It was a remarkable outcome..."
– Educator



What does this tell us?

The impact of Mealtime Expectations was not a direct change in children's eating behaviours, but a change in the adults, relationships and environments that shape children's experiences of food. ECEC staff became clearer about their role, families became more confident, and services developed more consistent approaches to mealtimes. As a result of the shift in adult expectations and practices, children were observed to experience calmer mealtimes, greater autonomy and more positive relationships with food. While further evaluation would be needed to understand impacts on dietary intake, the strongest evidence of change relates to children's experiences of mealtimes and their developing trust in their own bodies.



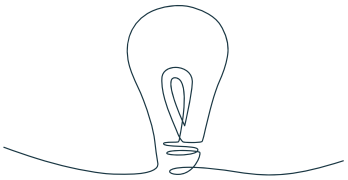
Service and sector change

ECEC services owned the change



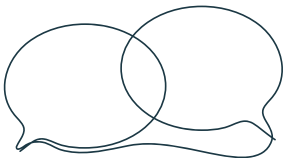
Policy and organisational culture and philospohy

“Expectations and policy match.”
– Educator



Staff induction and onboarding

“Putting our mealtime practice expectations in our induction books for staff, students and volunteers.”
– Coordinator



Family communication through family handbook and orientation

“These are now embedded in our orientation process and shared with new families to support a consistent message around our mealtime approach.”
– Director

Participating services described embedding Mealtime Value Statements into policies, family handbooks, staff induction processes, orientation resources and service procedures. This moved the approach beyond reliance on individual staff members and into the everyday systems that shape how services operate. Services commonly described the Mealtime Value Statements as becoming part of their organisational culture and identity. Rather than being viewed as a project delivered by the BHN Health Promotion team, ECEC staff described the approach as something owned by the service and embedded in day-to-day practice. This was an important outcome of the project as it established a clear and consistent philosophy about children's eating.

By explicitly communicating to families, the service’s values and approach during family tours and in the family handbook, prospective families gain a clear insight into the service’s philosophy and approach to mealtimes. This early alignment helped to establish realistic expectations for prospective families, reducing uncertainty and creating a strong foundation for respectful partnerships between ECEC staff and families. It can also support whether a family chooses to attend the service or not.

The project informed sector policy change, conversations and partnerships

The evaluation demonstrates that Mealtime Expectations influenced the broader ECEC sector at the systems level by contributing practice-based evidence that informed state policy, helped shift professional conversations around children's food environments and established new partnerships. Instead of remaining a local initiative, the project became a catalyst for sector-wide learning and collaboration.

At the family and ECEC service level, reflective practice **surfaced hidden assumptions about food, feeding, parenting and children's bodies.** At the sector level, implementation surfaced hidden assumptions about how policies were being interpreted in ECEC settings. In both cases, the project created space to reconnect good intentions with more nuanced, responsive practice.

Working closely with ECEC staff and services, Mealtime Expectations identified a disconnect between contemporary evidence and the language and guidance within existing policies. Although developed with positive intentions, nutrition policies were not always translated into practice as intended. The evaluation found that some interpretations reinforced monitoring of children's eating, moralisation of food and pressure-based feeding practices. Responding to this implementation gap, and to concerns raised by participating ECEC services, became an important driver for policy review and advocacy.

"...providing real local context of how their high-level policy...is directly being interpreted by educators."
– Project Team

"...all of the policy guidance and everything in guiding resources referenced 'limit discretionary food', 'avoid discretionary food', or 'sometimes food'. It was all deficit based and the lack of another voice in that conversation was just reinforcing everything we don't want to see."
– Project Team



Policy Reform

This work informed the review and reform of the **Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) Nutrition, Oral Health and Active Play Policy,** in collaboration with key experts, including Dr Kyla Smith, Paediatric Dietitian and Founder of Mealtimes, Dr Zali Yager from The Embrace Collective, health promotion practitioners, dietitians, and state-based health promotion program teams.

The consultation process created a platform for key conversations between statewide organisations working to support children's health and wellbeing. Partners shared expertise, implementation insights and barriers, helping to form alignment in how children's eating, food environments and wellbeing are understood and supported across the sector. While partners did not always share the same perspectives or agree, they were willing to engage in open, evidence-informed discussions. These conversations challenged assumptions, increased understanding of different viewpoints and considered how contemporary evidence could be applied within statewide health promotion programs.

Launched in February 2026, the policy became available to more than 1,300 ELAA members and reflects contemporary evidence on responsive feeding, child autonomy and size-inclusive practice, identified through implementation in ECEC settings. This practice-based insight may inform future policy reviews, ensuring future guidance is grounded in both current evidence and the realities of implementation within ECEC services.

"This policy will have far-reaching impact, providing structure and confidence for ECEC educators and in turn, improving the eating environments for children in their care"

- Dr Kyla Smith PhD, APD, AN
Paediatric Dietitian

Partnerships

As Mealtime Expectations progressed, the project team was increasingly invited to contribute to sector networks, policy discussions and collaborative initiatives, reflecting a growing recognition of the unique practice-based knowledge generated through the project and its relevance beyond participating services.

This is significant as it strengthens the connection between research, policy and practice. It also demonstrates how insights from local ECEC services can influence broader conversations about children's food environments, helping to improve consistency and coordinated approaches across organisations in the sector.

"...we use lived experience and local evidence to have a seat at the table, to make some of these more strategic decisions when we can."

– Project Team

See SHiNE: Supporting Healthful Initiatives in Nutrition Education

See National Nutrition Network



Key principles enabling change

The evaluation found that Mealtime Expectations achieved outcomes through a combination of enabling principles. Together, these principles created the conditions for trust, shared understanding and local ownership of change. While the Mealtime Value Statements were an important project output, the evaluation suggests that the process used to develop them was central to achieving outcomes. ECEC staff and families consistently identified reflection, discussion, family input, evidence and local sense-making as key parts of the change process.

Collaboration

Families and ECEC staff were involved as partners in shaping change

Family engagement was identified by services as one of the strongest contributors to implementation success. Families were involved in reflective practice sessions, surveys and co-design activities to co-develop the service's Mealtime Value Statements. ECEC staff described this level of family involvement as uncommon and usually difficult to achieve.

By involving families early, the project helped reduce the risk that mealtime changes would be seen as something imposed by the service. Instead, families and ECEC staff developed a shared understanding together, creating greater ownership, reduced resistance to change, and strengthened consistency between home and ECEC environments.

This helped strengthen trust and communication between families and ECEC staff, creating greater collaboration across home and ECEC services. These findings suggest that family engagement was a key mechanism for building collaborative partnerships, shared decision-making and sustainable practice change, consistent with the National Quality Standard's emphasis on partnerships with families and communities.

"Having the parents involved and hearing their perspective was one of the most helpful parts of the process. It enabled us to have a better understanding of their concerns and needs and also broke down some of our own biases around what we thought parents preferred."
– Educator

"The project was a great opportunity to get family input. The sessions with BHN gave families a chance to voice opinions and values. Families reported that this was an emotional time. Great for [service] to know practice and hear what families actually wanted and needed"
– Director

"Involving the parents was a big positive. Having parents involved in the process was groundbreaking and a key to success in creating the expectations. Parents told us they got so many benefits from their involvement and information they could use with their own families, and they had a better appreciation of the role of educators at mealtimes"
– Director

Reflective practice

Created safe, inclusive and collaborative spaces to explore beliefs, assumptions and experiences

A consistent finding across the evaluation was participants valued the facilitation approach used in the reflective practice sessions. ECEC staff and families consistently described feeling that their experiences were listened to and valued alongside research evidence, enabling participants to openly explore their experiences, assumptions and concerns about food and mealtimes without fear of judgement. This is significant because effective reflective practice relies on **psychologically safe environments** where participants feel able to expose vulnerabilities, contribute perspectives, question assumptions, and discuss challenges without fear of embarrassment, criticism, or negative consequences [xii]. This was particularly important because conversations about children's feeding and mealtime practices are shaped by more than nutritional knowledge alone. Parents' and caregivers' approaches to eating are influenced by strong emotions, personal histories, family expectations and concerns, and as a result these conversations can be highly personal and emotionally-laden[xiii].

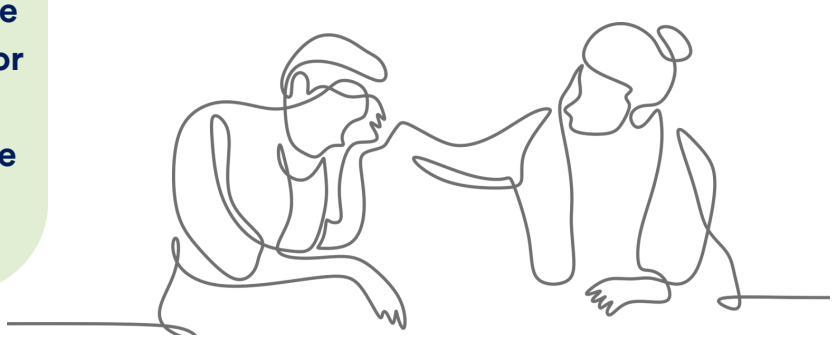
Psychological safety

Participants described the reflective practice sessions as safe environments in which they felt heard, respected and able to contribute honestly. Instead of the project team responding to stories by simply presenting evidence or correcting misconceptions, the team acknowledged participants' experiences before introducing research evidence to support further reflection. This approach enabled participants to reconsider long-held beliefs while maintaining trust and engagement.

"The opportunity to unpack and explore food and to take the time to reflect and understand our own biases."
– Educator

"The women who were running the workshops were absolute inspirations with their advocacy for change."
– Parent

"I have never felt so safe to participate. It is so rare to see people advocate for size inclusive practices, especially when you have no skin in the game..."
– Parent



Societal influence

The evaluation found that conversations about children's eating rarely existed in isolation from broader experiences of parenting, health and social expectations. Parents frequently described feeling pressure to ensure their child was eating the "right" foods, eating enough, and meeting expectations of what a “healthy child” should look like. These concerns were often accompanied by feelings of guilt, uncertainty and responsibility for children's health outcomes. Reflective practice provided an opportunity for participants to explore where these expectations had come from, how they influenced everyday feeding decisions, and whether they aligned with the needs of their child.

For some families, these conversations extended beyond mealtimes to include experiences within health care and broader society. One parent described attending a GP to support her child with a mild cold, only for her child to receive an unexpected referral to an ob*sity clinic. While this was a single example, it highlighted the broader context in which families make sense of children's eating, growth and wellbeing. Parents do not approach mealtimes in isolation but are influenced by the messages they receive from health professionals, public health campaigns, family members and wider society. Reflective practice created space for families to explore how these messages had shaped their beliefs, concerns and expectations around feeding, and to consider alternative approaches that were responsive to their child's individual needs.

Diverse perspectives

Participants also valued hearing the diverse experiences of others, reporting that listening to different perspectives was interesting, valuable and helpful.

"It was interesting to see how everyone approached mealtimes. Some people were very chill and nothing fazed them. And then you had the parents talking about running after kids the whole time trying to feed them."
– Parent

"We were all there coming from a different place and we all learnt something."
– Parent

"To see other parents' perspectives - that was probably the most valuable for me."
– Parent

Creating opportunities for ECEC staff and families to critically reflect on the social norms, expectations and messages that shape children's food environments through safe conversations, enabled participants to examine long-held assumptions and consider alternative approaches to mealtimes and child feeding. The process encouraged participants to question where their beliefs about food, eating and children's bodies had originated, including influences from diet culture and broader societal expectations. This deeper understanding helped ECEC staff and families make more deliberate choices about the values and practices they wanted to promote during mealtimes.

Evidence-informed learning

Enabling change by bringing together lived experience, professional expertise and research evidence

Mealtime Expectations enabled change by drawing on multiple forms of evidence. Families brought lived experience of navigating mealtime challenges, feeding children and social expectations around food and parenting. ECEC staff contributed professional expertise and observations from everyday practice, alongside experiences from their own upbringing and family contexts. These experiences were considered alongside contemporary research evidence relating to responsive feeding, child autonomy, size-inclusive practice and positive food environments.

The project created opportunities for participants to learn from different forms of evidence, including lived experience, professional expertise and research evidence, with the evaluation suggesting that services valued the research and evidence provided throughout the project.

“Having the document which referenced research was excellent. It allowed the team to make decisions around mealtimes from the perspective of research and best practice rather than from our own personal biases and judgements around food.”
– Director

Through delivery, evidence was never presented as the 'correct answer', but was introduced through discussion and reflection, supporting participants to understand the rationale for change and apply evidence-informed approaches within their own settings.

“Some concepts were challenging for staff but using evidence-based research and being open to conversations and viewpoint helped us to move forward and provide best practice each day for the child and families that attend our setting.”
– Director

“We did want it to be research and evidence based, our frameworks are amazing but when it comes to mealtimes that’s kind of missing.”
– Director

These findings suggest that learning was strengthened when lived experience, professional expertise and research evidence were brought together. The project recognised that meaningful change requires more than access to information alone; it requires opportunities to interpret, question and apply that information in the context of people's everyday experiences.

Responsive to local context

Understand each service's experiences, priorities and challenges, before identifying opportunities for change

Participating services entered the project with different structures, routines, family expectations, food provision models and mealtime challenges. Some services provided meals onsite, while others relied on lunchboxes from home. ECEC staff were also at different stages of readiness, with some already questioning existing approaches and others learning these concepts for the first time. Rather than applying predetermined Mealtime Value Statements across all services, the project sought to understand each service's experiences, priorities and challenges, before identifying opportunities for change. This allowed the work to be grounded in the realities of each service rather than assumptions about what support was needed.

This responsiveness appeared to be an important factor in engagement, with participants valuing the opportunity to explore their own experiences, test ideas in practice and revisit discussions over time. In contrast to one-off professional development, the project created space for reflection, experimentation and ongoing support.

“Unlike other PD where there is no follow up post-delivery, the project gave us the opportunity to continue exploring, learning and the ability to ask BHN questions.”
– Director

Services were able to determine what implementation looked like within their service, while still working towards shared principles with support from the project team. The evaluation suggests that this helped ECEC staff move beyond understanding the concepts and begin applying them in ways that felt practical and meaningful within their everyday practice.

Local changes occurred at both the service and project level, with the project itself evolving in response to participant feedback and implementation learnings. This iterative approach to the project reinforced that implementation was not something being done to services, but something that was being shaped **by and with them.** As a result, services increasingly described the work as their own, providing new examples of practice and highlighting gaps to the project team.

"When we first discussed the ME project, it seemed like a huge task. We wanted to test it first at a smaller scale... It was slow, we needed to be patient, we got the family on board too and within six months the child was trying all foods and her attitude to food had completely changed. It was a remarkable outcome so we trusted that we could roll it out across the whole service."
– Director

ECEC staff and families also began applying evidence in ways that aligned with their existing relationships, routines and quality improvement processes. The project team developed new resources in response to challenges identified by ECEC staff and families and services trialled approaches at their own pace, sometimes beginning with a single room before scaling across the service. This helped build confidence, strengthen ownership and support ongoing implementation beyond the project's direct involvement.

These findings suggest that responsiveness to local context was not simply a feature of project delivery, but enabled Mealtime Expectations to achieve engagement, relevance and sustained change.

"We plan to review and reflect on our mealtime value statements annually to ensure they remain relevant and meaningful."
– Director

What does this tell us?

Mealtime Expectations achieved outcomes not through a single intervention, but through a way of practising health promotion. Illustrating Fleming's systems scale rule that "Large-scale problems do not require large-scale solutions; they require small-scale solutions within a large-scale framework"[xiv], the evaluation suggests that meaningful and sustained change occurred when the project team created the conditions for trust, reflection, shared understanding and local ownership. For health promotion practitioners, the project highlights several transferable capabilities. Facilitating safe conversations, using evidence as a tool for reflection rather than instruction, working with complexity and uncertainty, adapting to local context, and identifying how local practice insights can inform broader systems change.





How did the project change?

The evaluation demonstrates that Mealtime Expectations evolved from it's initial pilot phase, while maintaining fidelity to its core principles. The foundations of the Mealtime Expectations project have remained consistent with core components of reflective practice, co-design and the development of shared Mealtime Value Statements remaining unchanged. It is the delivery of the model that has evolved and become responsive to the needs of each participating ECEC service. Adaptations were made to improve participation, strengthen family engagement and address challenges identified through implementation, improving the project's relevance and accessibility across diverse ECEC settings.

Co-creation of resources

Producing resources alongside ECEC services and families

Many of the resources now associated with Mealtime Expectations were not part of the original project design. Instead, they emerged through reflective practice sessions, co-design activities and ongoing conversations with participating services and families. This increased the relevance and usability of resources, with ECEC staff demonstrating greater ownership of and engagement with materials they had helped shape.

"The resources that we've co-developed with services...once we've launched [them]...[we] maintain those resources in the project."
– Project Team

Many ECEC staff observed families monitoring food intake on pick-up before meaningfully connecting with their child.

"I would like parents to ask about their child's day rather than check lunchboxes first thing"
– Educator

As a response, a resource titled "I'm so happy to see you!" was co-created. The resource encouraged families to prioritise connection on pick-up, with practical tips and conversation starters focusing on **Reconnecting**, **Refueling**, **Relaxing** and **Routine**. Shared with families and featured on Pop Culture Parenting podcast, the resource successfully supported families to first connect with their child on pick-up, with ECEC services reporting a dramatic drop in lunchbox checking, following the resource release.

"One of the big things that came from the data was anxiety around ensuring children had eaten enough, and biggest questions asked to educators was 'has my child eaten enough'. BHN developed a resource [I'm so happy to see you] and shared it at our AGM...it has been an overwhelming response from families, a great help for families to stop and remember to reconnect and worry about food later."
– Coordinator

The development of resources in response to implementation findings strengthened the practical relevance of Mealtime Expectations and ensured project learning could continue to support services beyond their direct participation.



Flexible implementation

Adapting delivery to meet service needs

Following the pilot phase of the project, implementation was adapted to accommodate the differing structures, schedules and needs of ECEC services and families. Changes included splitting the ECEC staff reflective practice session across consecutive weeks if needed, and offering sessions either during the day or in the evening to improve ECEC staff and family participation. An unanticipated benefit observed from splitting the sessions was that ECEC staff were able to reflect on their individual practice between sessions, identifying where changes to practice could be made.

"Splitting the staff reflective session worked really well, lots of discussion in between, could prepare with questions between sessions."
– Nominated Supervisor

Rather than expecting services to adapt to the project, Mealtime Expectations adapted its delivery to suit different service contexts, staffing structures and family circumstances. This flexibility enabled services to engage with the project in ways that were practical and achievable while maintaining the integrity of the overall project.

"Session two was a great opportunity to unpack the changes they experienced/observed in the week between sessions. This was really effective in reflecting from week to week. The educators came ready to reflect, ask questions, and share positive changes in practice already!"
– Project Team



Sustained improvements

Key adaptations that became embedded in the project methodology

From the evaluation, it is evident that ECEC staff and family feedback consistently informed changes to facilitation methods, family engagement strategies and implementation resources. These adaptations have now become **part of the ongoing model** delivery.

Following the pilot phase, the project team introduced in-person reflective practice sessions for families. Initially, family engagement occurred only through online surveys. Evaluation findings highlighted the value of creating opportunities for families and ECEC staff to **explore mealtime experiences together**, leading to the addition of dedicated family sessions.

ECEC staff reported that family involvement was "groundbreaking" and "a key to success" in supporting consistency in messaging, behaviours, and practice between the service and home. Through the in-person family sessions, the project team was able to tease out concerns and expectations, provide capacity building as well as unpack mental models and belief systems centred around food and bodies. This enabled richer data and provided the opportunity to unpack sticking points between the service and families which were often centred on miscommunication or misunderstanding.

"Having the parents involved and hearing their perspective was one of the most helpful parts of the process. It enabled us to have a better understanding of their concerns/needs and also broke down some of our own biases around what we thought parents preference."
– Coordinator

"So valuable hearing from both families and staff, so often it's just the insights of one or the other. Nice to have data that matches."
– Nominated Supervisor

With the addition of an in-person reflective practice session for families, as noted the timing of the sessions required more flexibility to suit the availability of families to participate.

Additional sustained adaptations to the project included the development of a family version of the Mealtime Value Statements to support consistency between mealtime practices at home and within services. This was identified as a need by one of the participating services and became embedded within project delivery to support all services.

"A resource that would be useful is a one pager of the Mealtime Value Statements for families, to practice this in the context of home."
– Director



Opportunities for change, scale and sustainability

The evaluation supports continued investment in Mealtime Expectations, with opportunities to strengthen family learning, build the evidence base through child voice, sustain the project through workforce and systems influence, and scale the approach strategically across policy, practice and life stages.



Child Voice

Incorporating children's perspectives and experiences of mealtimes

While Mealtime Expectations successfully engaged ECEC staff and families, children were not directly engaged. ECEC staff identified child voice as an important future opportunity, noting that children can provide unique insights into mealtime routines, environments and experiences.

"Involvement from children/child voice would be good to include. A say in how things are run, children leading the routines, rituals e.g. where do we want to eat."
– Educator

"...getting children's perspectives on mealtimes could be included."
– Educator

Future implementation could explore developmentally appropriate methods for understanding children's experiences of mealtimes while avoiding a focus on food consumption, food choices or weight-related or weight-centric outcomes. This would also align strongly with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and National Quality Framework, both of which emphasise children's agency, participation and voice in decision-making. It would also strengthen the evidence base by providing a more complete understanding of how Mealtime Expectations is experienced by children themselves.

Strengthening family translation

Incorporating additional support to translate concepts into everyday family practice

While the project successfully developed resources and engagement opportunities that helped families better understand the service's mealtime philosophy, the findings suggest a gap in the availability of ongoing support for strengthening translation of the project's key concepts into everyday practice at home. Families and ECEC staff identified opportunities to further strengthen family support as a valuable improvement to Mealtime Expectations.

"...more sharing with families about practice and how they can support this at home."
– Educator

"If there's any kind of material around how we can keep the routine they follow at school and transform that in a home setting, I think that will be really helpful in my situation."
– Parent

"I think the only thing I wish is that if there were like some tips and tricks that the childcare uses to encourage kids to be engaged and to eat... that would be good to know."
– Parent

Participating services embedded responsive, relationship-based mealtime approaches within the ECEC environment, yet families often had fewer opportunities to explore these concepts in-depth beyond the facilitated session, limiting the translation of information to families beyond the face-to-face participants.

Some parents also continued to worry about whether children could be trusted to regulate their own intake, both eating too much and eating too little, highlighting a need for translating information and resources to families.

"Going back to what I did learn... I'm very conscious not to do it is something that they said, was that we shouldn't be arriving at kinder and the first thing you do is check a lunchbox. And maybe I would have done that sometimes here and there... it wasn't like a conscious thing, I've got to go and check it. Because now I actually really, I do see parents who do it. And I think, should have come to the workshop!"
– Parent

This interest and desire to learn more about how families can better support their children during mealtimes at home, suggests families are motivated to improve their own approaches and align the messaging from the service to the home. Continued development of practical resources, discussion opportunities and family learning activities may strengthen the translation of key concepts into home environments and increase consistency across children's food environments.

Sustaining Mealtime Expectations

More than resources or implementation tools

Many of the outcomes observed through Mealtime Expectations were supported by skilled facilitation, reflective practice and the ability to hold conversations about food, health, parenting and body image in psychologically safe ways. Sustaining the project therefore requires more than maintaining resources or implementation tools; it requires ongoing capability within the health promotion workforce. The evaluation also identified ongoing tensions between the principles underpinning Mealtime Expectations and the wide range of food and health messages that families encounter in everyday life.

“Then they can choose the healthy food... and choose the sometimes food...”
– Parent

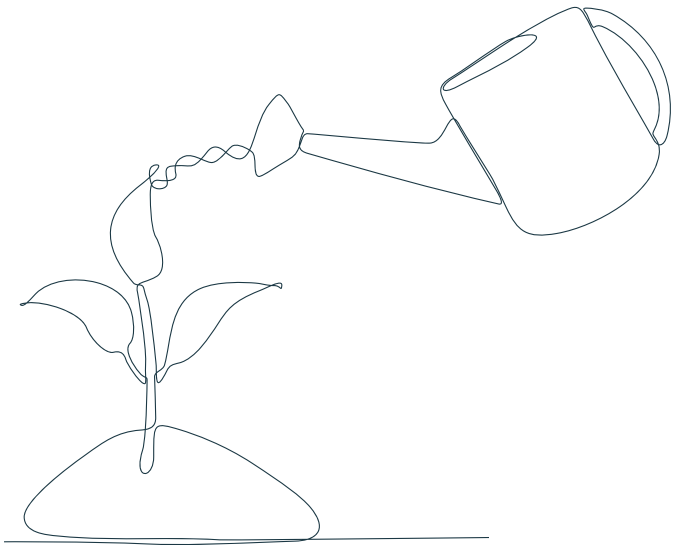
"Through [the provider]. What kind of diet can help them to have healthy teeth. And then they show the kids what the sometimes food and the everyday food to give them the pictures and then ask them to answer the questions about what foods are they?"
– Parent

These examples highlight the complexity of the food information environment in which families are making decisions. Families drew on messages from multiple sources during participation in the project and when interviewed, including health, education and community settings, and these did not always align with the principles promoted through Mealtime Expectations.

This finding highlights a broader challenge for health promotion initiatives seeking to support consistent, strengths-based approaches to food and eating, particularly when families are navigating competing ideas about health, nutrition and children's bodies.

While Mealtime Expectations promotes body trust, responsive feeding and positive food environments, the evaluation highlighted that these approaches exist within a broader system where multiple understandings of food, health and bodies coexist. Participants described navigating a range of messages from health, education and community settings, which could at times sit in tension with project principles.

As a result, ongoing efforts to influence policy, professional learning, sector partnerships and state-wide initiatives may help create greater alignment across settings and support the broader adoption of positive food environment approaches.



Scaling Mealtime Expectations

Scaling the project's principles and methodology, not a fixed delivery model

Mealtime Expectations achieved outcomes across ECEC services, families, partnerships and the broader sector and these findings support further scaling of the project. Importantly, the evaluation indicates that the project's success is closely linked to the **way** it is implemented rather than a specific set of resources or activities. As a result, scaling should focus on maintaining fidelity to the enabling principles of Mealtime Expectations while allowing implementation to adapt to different contexts, prioritised issues and need.

Lifestage scaling

Work to scale Mealtime Expectations into primary and secondary school settings began during the evaluation period, representing a significant opportunity to build continuity across children's food environments and their relationships with food. Schools, like ECEC services, play an important role in shaping social norms, expectations and experiences related to food, health and bodies. Expanding the project across the life stage provides an opportunity to test how the principles underpinning Mealtime Expectations can be adapted to new educational contexts while maintaining fidelity to the project's methodology. Importantly, scaling should not involve replicating ECEC specific activities. Instead, adaptation **should respond to the unique needs, structures and realities of school communities** while preserving the relational, reflective and systems-focused elements that underpin the project's success.

Vertical scaling

The project has already contributed to broader sector influence through informing ELAA's Nutrition, Oral Health and Active Play Policy. Future implementation provides further opportunities to influence policy narratives relating to children's food environments, responsive feeding, positive food environments and size-inclusive practice. The evaluation demonstrates that implementation insights generated through ECEC services can make an important contribution to policy development by ensuring frameworks and resources remain grounded in real-world practice.

Health promotion scaling

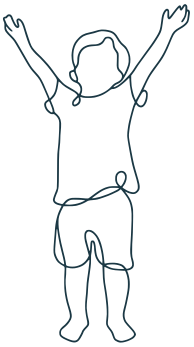
Beyond food environments, the evaluation generated evidence that can contribute to health promotion practice more broadly. The project demonstrated the value of creating conditions for collaboration, reflection, shared understanding and local ownership. These principles may have relevance for other complex health promotion priorities where social norms, lived experience and competing perspectives shape health outcomes. A significant opportunity exists to share learnings among health promotion practitioners, highlighting that scaling the approach may ultimately have greater impact than scaling the project itself.



Recommendations

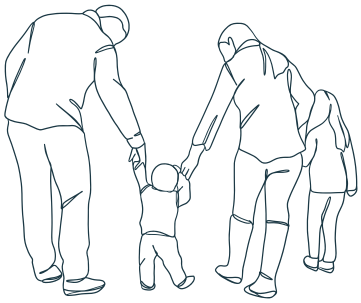
The evaluation found that Mealtime Expectations achieved meaningful outcomes for ECEC staff, families, children in participating services, while also contributing to broader sector learning and systems influence. The following recommendations are informed by the evaluation findings and future implementation opportunities identified by participants.

Recommendations for future implementation



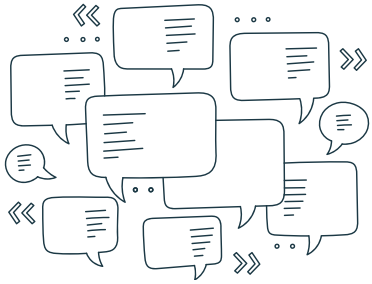
Strengthen understanding of children's experiences and outcomes

The evaluation identified opportunities to strengthen understanding of how children experience mealtimes and how observed changes in mealtime practices influence children's outcomes. Future implementation could strengthen evaluation measures to capture **child voice**, by including ECEC staff reflection surveys that capture additional observations relating to children's engagement, autonomy, participation and experiences at mealtimes. Additional consideration should be given to capturing child perspectives using developmentally appropriate approaches. Strengthening this would help clarify whether observed changes reflect shifts in children's experiences of mealtimes, changes in adult expectations and monitoring practices, or broader changes in the mealtime environment.



Explore opportunities to extend learning and support for families

The evaluation found strong family engagement throughout Mealtime Expectations and identified opportunities to further support families to apply project principles within home environments. Future implementation should explore the development of additional family resources, learning opportunities and follow-up engagement that support families to understand and apply responsive feeding, body trust and positive food environment approaches at home. This may help strengthen alignment between ECEC and home settings and support families as they move away from consumption-based monitoring of children's eating.



Support workforce learning through sharing the principles and methodology of Mealtime Expectations

The evaluation supports further scaling of Mealtime Expectations, focused on the project's principles that may be adapted to different contexts. Opportunities include continued policy influence, adaptation across the life stage, and translation of key project principles into broader health promotion practice. The evaluation found that the success of Mealtime Expectations is closely linked to skilled health promotion practice, including facilitation, reflective practice, systems thinking and the ability to hold psychologically safe conversations about food, bodies, parenting and health. Long-term sustainability will require continued investment in workforce capability as well as ongoing efforts to improve alignment between Mealtime Expectations and broader policy, program and service environments. The findings indicate that the project's greatest opportunity for scale may be through understanding and strengthening how health promotion practitioners work with complexity, lived experience, reflection and local adaptation, rather than replicating a fixed program model.

"Currently it's not a project that can be replicated [as a rigid module]. I feel like the safety element and being able to provide the evidence that is needed is tricky... colleagues may learn from the approach but really, it requires holding a safe space."

– Project Team



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Appendix

Theory of Change

Developed by project evaluation team

PROBLEM	→	INPUTS	→	ACTIVITIES
SYSTEM · For-profit ECEC services · Existing approaches to HP with ECEC don't align with need (system/service problem) · HP programs traditionally focus on teaching children about "healthy eating" and "unhealthy" · NQS no assessment on Mealtime Environment and guidance is unclear. Reinforces social/individual biases · Monitoring/Surveillance · Diet culture and weight stigma (command and control mindset) **SERVICE / FAMILIES** · Educators and families don't talk about mealtimes/food · Educator stress at mealtimes · "Fussy Eating" / Refuse to eat / Hiding in cupboard · Misalignment between educators and families around mealtimes · Food waste concerns · Children are anxious at mealtimes · Parents fear of consequences of not eating (right/enough) · Shame		**RESOURCES** · Staff · Policy and Evidence · Time of staff and parents at ECEC settings · $ from Dept of Health (ongoing for BHN HP Staff) · Relationships with ECEC non profit committees, parents and educators · Relationships with other relevant organisations · Collaborate with BHN paeds dietitians and School Readiness Team		**ECEC SERVICE** · Initial meeting with ECEC setting (director and lead educator) · Reflective Practice session with educators · Online survey for educators · Thematic coding · Co-design session with educators and families together · Write up the Mealtimes Value Statements for ECEC and home · Implementation through practice and role modelling · Information session or AGM to present to families **FAMILIES AND REVIEW** · Reflective Practice session with families · Online survey for families · Reflection session held (following 1 term implementation) · Create or increase resources and give vocabulary or language support · Offer support for policy review or parent handbook review

ASSUMPTIONS				
	SHARED INTENT ECEC and families want to do right by kids.	**BODY TRUST** Kids innately know their bodies (eg. fullness or hunger) *neurodiversity variation.	**ADULT INFLUENCE** Adult beliefs, expectations and practices shape children's mealtime environments.	**CONTEXT** Implementation is unique to each setting and aligned with our HP principles.

OUTCOMES

BELIEFS	EDUCATORS & FAMILIES	ENVIRONMENT	CHILDREN
· Identifying how we "do" health promotion · Shift deeply held beliefs about "healthy eating" · Belief systems shifting/understood · Deep understanding of why this approach to mealtimes is important · Think Feel Do	· Educators and families are aligned in mealtime expectations and practice · Educators are confident in developmentally appropriate food learning · Educators are confident to have discussions with families around mealtime approach · Decrease food monitoring and surveillance by educators (and families) · Educators feel they have permission to do mealtimes differently · Parents are supported to recreate positive mealtime environments at home	· Positive mealtime environments for children (eg. no pressure, body trust) · Environments that are comfortable, safe and welcoming for all · Children are not exposed to pressure or developmentally inappropriate food learning · Stronger connections b/w families and educators · "we're all in this together" educators and families	· Children experience positive mealtimes at ECEC · Children feel safe and trusted to eat · Children feel comfortable at mealtimes at ECEC · Children develop a healthy relationship with food · Children build positive relationships with food and their bodies (indirect)

SYSTEM INFLUENCE

Advocacy: ELAA Policy Reform	State based HP relationships. Working to change their approach and language	National Nutrition Network: Best Practice Guide development	SHiNE: Research participant for developing school based nutrition messages	Being involved at school level (life course); piloting this project in primary schools	Share practice to others in health promotion sector and with BHN


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