



For The Early Learning Centre Sector

Nutrition Fact Sheet

Creating a Positive and Encouraging Food Environment

Spring 2025



In early childhood, food experiences help shape lifelong eating habits. The way food is offered, talked about and modelled during these early years plays a powerful role in how children view eating. A positive food environment encourages children to build a healthy relationship with food, to listen to their bodies and explore a variety of foods without pressure. Early learning centres are uniquely positioned to support this development. With consistent routines, nurturing educators, and daily shared meals, early learning centres offer an ideal setting to create a supportive food environment that fosters curiosity, confidence and enjoyment around eating.

Key Messages

- A positive food environment encourages children to explore new foods at their own pace and build healthy eating habits.
- Core elements of a positive food environment include creating calm and predictable mealtimes, a stress free atmosphere and role modeling.
- The goal of creating a positive food environment is to encourage habit formation, building confidence around food and help to encourage food variety.

What is a Positive Food Environment?

A positive food environment is one where children feel safe, respected and free to explore food in their own way. It is not just about offering nutritious meals, it's about how those meals are offered and the attitudes that surround eating. When mealtimes are calm, predictable and pressure free, children are more likely to try new foods, eat according to their appetite and develop positive eating behaviours.

Core Elements of a Positive Food Environment

Calm and predictable mealtimes -

- Regular mealtimes help children feel secure and avoids grazing.
- Minimise distractions - avoiding keeping the TV on or allowing access to electronic devices helps children to focus on their food and the mealtime.

Stress free atmosphere -

- A calm environment supports digestion and helps children to be open to new flavours and textures.
- Maintaining a relaxed tone, especially when introducing new foods.



Educator role modeling -

- Educators showcasing enjoyment and interest in food.
- Talking positively about food.
- Avoiding ‘good food’ vs ‘bad food’ labelling.

Sensory exploration and hands on learning -

- Encouraging smells, textures and safe tasting.
- Allowing children to use their hands when exploring new foods.

Practices to Encourage a Positive Food Environment

Strategy	Purpose
Regular meal/snack schedule	Regulates appetite and builds anticipation
Limiting prompts/pressure	Avoids anxiety and resistance
Positive mealtime language	Encourages exploration
Sensory experience	Introduce new foods gradually

Why It Matters?

Habit Formation - with almost half of a child’s weekday meals consumed in child care, early learning centres have immense influence.

Behavioural Outcomes - Positive feeding can correlates with more balanced eating, lower fussiness and greater enjoyment.

Emotional and Social Benefits - Eating together helps children to build confidence and communication skills.

Summary

Implementing these practices can help create a positive food environment that encourages children to develop trust around food, explore a variety of foods at their own pace, and build healthy eating habits that support their overall growth and development.



For more information, please visit:
 Better Health Channel - Toddlers and Mealtime Behaviour
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/toddlers-and-mealtime-behaviour>
 Healthy Eating Advisory Service - Promoting Healthy Eating In Early Childhood Education and Care Services
<https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/resources/promoting-healthy-eating/promoting-healthy-eating-in-early-childhood-education-and-care-services/>

