

Public Hearing for the Select Committee on Estimates 22 July 2024

About Nutrition Australia ACT

Nutrition Australia ACT (NAACT) is a local health promotion charity helping ACT communities build nourishing, affordable and sustainable food environments. Through the development of the ACT Nutrition Support Service® (ACTNSS), NAACT has successfully established itself as the face of public health nutrition in the ACT.

Key Issues

The ACT Budget 2024-25, Budget Statements C of ACT Health Directorate, Strategic Indicator 1.3 measures fruit and vegetable intake as the population level indicator of a healthy diet. With only 4% of adults and 3% of children meeting the guidelines for daily serves of vegetables, plenty of work is needed to improve this alarming statistic.

NAACT recognises many setting-based opportunities where nutrition support can positively impact health outcomes such as seniors, aged care, vulnerable groups and minority populations. One of the least supported settings that can have a lasting impact on healthy diet and health outcomes into adulthood is the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector which is our key issue to be raised at the public hearing.

Menu regulation and nutrition support for Early Childhood Education and Care services

NAACT is calling for the ACT Government to strengthen food provision regulations and standards in ECEC services ensuring all children accessing ECEC services are given the best possible nutrition foundation in their early years of life. To achieve this, investment is urgently needed to fund nutrition support to the ECEC sector. This will enable:

- provision of annual menu assessments that can ensure infants and young children have access to nutritious meals and snacks that meet their needs
- training for ECEC staff to achieve optimal nutrition environments supporting children to develop a healthy relationship with food (see Appendix for evidence of effective training)
- facilitation of an ECEC community of practice providing evidence-informed nutrition support to ECEC staff including cooks/chefs.

Background

Nutrition is fundamental in the first five years of a child's life, particularly when it comes to their growth and brain development. The food environment in ECEC settings plays a crucial role in shaping children's eating habits and overall health.

Facts:

- There are 372 centre-based care services in the ACT¹.
- In 2021, 59.2% of 0–5-year-old children in the ACT attended childcare services².
- Children attending centre base care in the ACT spend an average of 34 hours per week in ECEC settings.¹

¹ Australian Government Department of Education December quarter 2023

² ACT AEDC 2021 Data Insight Paper: Early Childhood Education and Care and the AEDC

- Over 90% of centre-based services in the ACT provide meals to children, where children will consume most of their weekly nutrition.

State and territory governments are responsible for the health, safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes of children in care. There are currently only three jurisdictions within Australia that provide free government supported state-wide healthy eating support services for ECEC settings (NSW, Victoria and Tasmania).

Whilst ECEC services and settings can pay for privately obtained services, the problem is that most services cannot afford the cost, therefore the cost is prohibitive to services accessing support.

Appendix

Evidence of effective ECEC educator training in the ACT

Program: Nourishing Little Minds® in Early Childhood

Delivery: February 2020 – June 2023

Funding: ACT Government under the Health Promotion Grants Program

Overview: Nourishing Little Minds® in Early Childhood (NLMEC) is a NAACT initiative designed to maximise skills and opportunities for implementing a positive food and healthy eating culture within ECEC settings.

The project involved the delivery of a 2-hour face-to-face training session delivered on-site to 79 ECEC services reaching over 1000 educators. Facilitated by Accredited Practising Dietitians, the sessions aimed to empower educators to encompass healthy food and nutrition learning and play experiences within their centre programming. Participating centres were also provided a kit of resources comprising a selection of food related children's literature and an educator manual to help embed healthy eating practices across the whole service.

Key outcomes:

- The program was highly valued by participating ECEC services with 93% of long day care centres still implementing aspects of the NLMEC program 6-months after receiving the training.
- Participants of the PL were overwhelmingly satisfied with the training they received with 90% of directors interested in receiving repeated training opportunities for their staff in the future.
- The PL sessions increased educators' knowledge, skills and confidence to influence healthy eating behaviours among children in their care.
- The NLMEC program was found to positively impact children's interest in healthy food with 83% of directors reporting that the program was effective in increasing children's positive relationship with food.