

Play and learning pack

Mealtimes

An intentional teaching resource

September 2026

This Play and Learning Pack on mealtimes was designed to help early childhood teachers, educators and leaders understand intentional teaching and how to strengthen it in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services.

About the early childhood intentional teaching model and supporting resources

These Play and Learning Packs were used in the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s [2025 research](#) to develop and test an [intentional teaching model and supporting resources](#). For this research, we used an iterative design-based methodology, working alongside educators from 13 diverse ECEC services. The resources provided information on foundational knowledge, beliefs and practices that support play-based learning with intentionality.

This series of resources supports more effective intentional teaching. These Play and Learning Packs were designed to help early childhood teachers, educators and leaders understand:

- what intentional teaching is
- what it looks like in practice
- how to strengthen it in their settings.

The Play and Learning Packs complement an intentional teaching model AERO developed with ECEC services. The model, the practice resource and the Play and Learning Packs, emerged directly from that research collaboration.

The intentional teaching model and supporting resources bring evidence-based approaches for effective intentional teaching together with the wisdom of educators and teachers to ensure both evidence-informed rigor and usefulness in everyday practice.

How to use this Play and Learning Pack

This pack is intended to support your use of AERO's intentional teaching model and practice resource. Focusing attention on a specific aspect of the program will support you in setting learning intentions for children and broader program goals. Using a stepped approach to guide your reflections supports you in engaging in meaningful planning for individual children and the whole group.



Step 1: Observation and reflection

Spend some time reflecting on how your mealtimes work. You might focus on all of your mealtimes throughout the day, or just one specific time (e.g., lunchtime).

Read the information in this pack and ask yourself:

- What are our learning intentions for mealtimes?
- How does the mealtime routine work now?
- What opportunities are there for interactions and conversations?
- Are mealtimes relaxed and enjoyable?
- What opportunities are there for children to be independent?
- How does the mealtime environment support our learning intentions?

Identify what other opportunities you provide for learning during mealtimes. How could you promote these?



Step 2: Planning for learning

Use the Intentional Teaching Thinking Tool to identify 'what stands out' from your observations and to plan your learning intentions.

Use your learning intentions to plan what you will do to achieve them.

Record your plans using the Intentional Teaching Planning Format.

Implement your plans.



Step 3: Reflection and evaluation

Continue to implement your plans, reviewing and evaluating them regularly, and using the thinking tool to continue to plan your next steps. Reflect on the impact of your intentions and teaching strategies for educators, children and families.

Mealtimes

In ECEC services, a significant portion of each day is taken up by routines such as mealtimes, toileting and nappy changes, and sleep and rest. Often, these times are seen in purely practical terms, as something to get through as quickly and efficiently as possible to get back to the ‘real’ learning. However, such an approach misses the opportunities that these routines offer for learning.

Mealtimes in particular are a great opportunity for social engagement between adults and children and between children themselves. Rather than simply being about eating, mealtimes should be as calm, relaxed and enjoyable as possible. This not only maximises the opportunities for social interactions but also creates an environment in which children are more likely to eat well. This is particularly important for children who may be ‘fussy’ eaters, or younger children who are trying new foods for the first time.

Mealtimes also provide important opportunities to learn about the social expectations (such as manners) that apply, and about food itself.

Mealtimes are the perfect context in which to talk about food – where it comes from and how it has been prepared – and also to learn specific language and vocabulary to describe food. They are also great opportunities for children to learn self-help skills as they learn first to feed themselves, and later, to serve and clean up after themselves.

Mealtimes are also great opportunities to engage in calm and responsive conversation. They can be a chance to talk about the day – what has happened so far, and what children are planning to do next – or other subjects of interest, such as what happened on the weekend or favourite movies.

However, calm, relaxed and enjoyable mealtimes don’t just happen. There is lots of planning and organisation that needs to happen behind the scenes.

Thinking about the organisation of the mealtime space, the timing of meals, the roles of different adults to support children’s experience and the practical running of the routine are all critical.

Routine times are excellent chances to engage children in 1:1 interactions, and to promote the development of relationships, communication and social skills. For this to happen, routines need to be well-planned, with the aim of ensuring that they are:

- calm and relaxed
- social and interactive
- enjoyable
- provide opportunities for independence and agency.

If you can achieve these 4 things, then your routines will meet the needs of children and adults at your service.



Mealtimes at different ages

The nature of mealtimes will vary depending on the ages of the children involved.

Babies

For very young children, mealtimes are an opportunity to build close and trusting relationships. Feeding a child their bottle is an intimate experience that builds closeness. Such times should be planned carefully to ensure that the adults involved can give their full attention to the child, and that the experience is calm and nurturing.

For this reason, it's best to avoid bottle propping and other approaches to feeding that reduce the physical and emotional connection between adult and child. It's also a much safer practice.

As children get older, they will begin to eat solid foods too. The introduction of new foods often requires patience and individual support and encouragement. It also often involves sensory exploration on the child's part, and the potential for mess. Ensuring that mealtimes are calm and unhurried, and that educators and children aren't stressed or anxious about the experience, is therefore essential.

Make sure that mealtimes are pleasant, positive and allow adults to focus on each child as an individual. Avoid 'institutionalising' mealtimes with production line approaches that aim to feed as many children as quickly as possible and ignore the importance of warm and personalised interactions.

Toddlers

Toddlerhood is a time when children are asserting their independence in all aspects of their life, including mealtimes.

While they may still require support and guidance, they also want to do things for themselves and in their own ways. This can cause conflict if the aim of a mealtime is to eat as quickly, neatly and efficiently as possible.

To avoid this, adults need to provide opportunities for toddlers to make their own choices and be independent within the general structure of the mealtime routine.

Grouping children in small groups at separate tables with attentive adults helps to ensure that toddler mealtimes run smoothly and that children can exercise their independence with patient and caring support.

Calm and relaxed mealtime routines also help adults to better tolerate the mess that is often the result of toddlers exercising their independence and ensure that the experience remains a pleasant one for everyone.

Older children

For older children, mealtimes are not only a chance to eat, but they are an important social occasion. Children at this age are even more independent, and as their ability to do things for themselves improves, they need less direct adult guidance and support. An adult presence, however, is still important – both to ensure things run smoothly and also to participate in children's conversations and continue to build warm and trusting relationships.

As children's conversational skills develop, mealtimes can provide a great chance to engage children in discussion in a way that isn't always possible at other times of the day. This is where important opportunities for learning can arise – either spontaneously in response to conversational topics as they come up, or in a planned way.

Mealtimes are a great opportunity to put back-of-mind goals into action, as you respond to the opportunities that children's conversations create.

Planned interactions or conversations are also important, but try not to be too heavy-handed with these. Remember, the aim is for an enjoyable and natural experience, not one that feels like a lesson or a chore.



Adults' role in mealtimes

The adult role in relation to routines is firstly organisational. This means making arrangements ahead of time to ensure that the routine runs smoothly. Routine times are typically busy times. Without this background organisation, they're liable to become chaotic and overwhelming for children and adults alike.

Our role in relation to routines is, therefore, to plan ahead to ensure that they are:

- calm and relaxed
- social and interactive
- enjoyable.

Once this is done, it frees us up to engage with the children in warm and supportive ways, and allows us to take advantage of learning opportunities as they arise.

In relation to mealtimes, consider the following factors:

- **Timing and pacing** – Make sure there's enough time for the meal and that the whole experience doesn't feel rushed.
- **Group size and organisation** – Consider how many children need to participate in the routine. How can you organise them in ways that ensure the experience remains relaxed and enjoyable? For example, smaller groups of children at several small tables usually work better than having a whole group of children together at a single large table.

- **Minimise movement** – When adults are constantly moving around, it can be unsettling for children. How can you organise things so that adults aren't constantly getting up and down during a meal? They will be better able to focus on meeting the needs of the children they're sitting with if they can stay seated. If needed, consider having one person as the designated 'runner' who can move between the tables and collect things as needed, rather than having everyone moving around at once.
- **Plan ahead for possible delays** – Routines are the part of the day that are most susceptible to delays. Plan ahead so that you have a repertoire of songs, stories and simple games ready if you have to wait.
- **Consistency** – Children's lunchtime is also, often, adult lunchtime. Consider how you can manage staff breaks in ways that are least disruptive to the lunchtime routine. The more consistent that staffing is, the more settled children are likely to be. Adults need their breaks, too, but think about how you can time these to minimise impact on the children's experience, and whether there are specific roles that someone who will be going on a break can take on. Changing the 'runner' mid-lunch, for example, is probably less disruptive than changing an educator who is sitting directly with a group of children.

Learning potentials at mealtimes

Learning area	Potential learning	Links to learning outcomes
Physical wellbeing	• Nutrition and healthy eating • Physical skills involved in eating independently, serving food, pouring drinks, using utensils, etc.	• Wellbeing
Social skills and relationships	• Turn-taking, sharing and negotiating • Learning behavioural expectations (including manners) • Participating in a group experience	• Identity • Connection • Wellbeing • Effective communicators
Executive function	• Self-help skills/independence • Turn-taking and waiting for a turn • Expressing preferences • Trying new things • Following behavioural expectations (e.g., sitting while eating, using appropriate manners)	• Identity • Wellbeing
Content knowledge	• Learning about food and related topics (e.g., recycling and composting waste) • Other topics as they arise (e.g., mathematical language involved in talking about portion sizes)	• Confident and involved learners • Effective communicators
Communication	• Conversation skills, including: • Participating in conversation/interactions with adults • Participating in peer conversations (including initiating conversations, responding appropriately, continuing a conversation)	• Connection • Effective communicators



Intentional teaching planning format

This template is informed by AERO's intentional teaching model and practice resource. These resources will support an understanding of intentional teaching and completion of this planning resource.

Group: _____

Date: _____

Area: _____

Context/Background

What has been happening in this area recently? Who has been involved? What learning seems most prominent? What are the children most interested in?

Learning intentions

Front-of-mind (short-term) goals: What is your main learning focus for this area for this period of time? Try to keep this to one to 3 goals max.

Back-of-mind (long-term) goals: What other learning goals are you keeping in the back of your mind in case there is an opportunity to pursue them? Keep this to 5 goals max.

Learning provisions

Resources and materials: What specific resources and materials will you provide to support your learning intentions? How will you set them up?

Learning provisions

Planned experiences: Are there any pre-planned and/or adult-guided experiences you will plan for this area? If so, include details.

Teaching strategies: Based on your learning intentions, what teaching strategies are going to be most important to use to successfully achieve them?

Evaluation

What happened? Remember to focus on what learning occurred rather than just what the children did.

What next? Based on what happened, what is the next phase for this learning? Will you simplify, consolidate, extend or challenge what you have observed? Or will you change your focus and introduce something new?