

PICNIC in Early Education: Supporting Responsive Feeding in Early Childhood Settings

Abstract

Background

Responsive feeding supports children to listen to their hunger and fullness cues, build autonomy around food and experience positive mealtimes. While evidence for responsive feeding is well established, there has been limited translation of this approach into professional development for educators working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings.

Objective

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of a responsive feeding nutrition education program, PICNIC in Early Education (PIEE), on educator feeding practices and mealtime environments.

Methods

A sequential mixed-methods, before-and-after intervention design was used across ten ECEC services in the Mid North Coast Local Health District (MNCLHD). Educator feeding practices were assessed using the Childcare Food and Activity Practices Questionnaire (CFAPQ), and direct mealtime observations were conducted using a modified Environment and Policy

Assessment and Observation (EPAO) tool scored with the CELEBRATE scale. Semi-structured interviews with centre directors explored barriers and enablers to implementation.

Results

Following the intervention, educators demonstrated a significant increase in support for child autonomy at mealtimes and significant reductions in controlling feeding practices. Centre-level observations showed significant improvements in feeding practices and overall nutrition environments. Preliminary qualitative insights highlighted the clarity and accessibility of the program as key enablers, alongside time constraints and family lunchbox practices as ongoing challenges.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that PIEE is a feasible and effective model for improving responsive feeding practices within ECEC settings. Self-directed, evidence-based professional learning supported by practical tools has the potential to strengthen educator capability and foster more supportive mealtime environments for young children.



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Alison Walton is a Health Promotion Officer on the Mid North Coast of NSW with a Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics and a Master of Public Health. She is passionate about evidence-based, responsive feeding and supporting educators to feel confident and reduce stress at mealtimes. Her research used mixed methods to examine self-directed learning modules to improve educator feeding practices.