



Nutrition  
Australia



## MEDIA RELEASE

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### **Latest data shows ACT lagging nationally on early childhood development outcomes**

Latest Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data reveals a clear disconnect between the ACT's policy ambition for children's wellbeing and the lived reality for families, with the territory ranking second-lowest nationally for children's physical health and wellbeing. While national outcomes have remained relatively stable, the ACT is tracking downwards, reinforcing the need for stronger early intervention, including the establishment of an Early Childhood Nutrition Hub proposed by Nutrition Australia ACT.

Nutrition Australia ACT CEO Leanne Elliston said, "The importance of nutrition in the first five years of life to children's physical health, brain development and lifelong wellbeing is well established, yet even in a small, highly educated and well-resourced jurisdiction, the ACT lacks a clear, coordinated and funded framework to support early childhood nutrition."

The ACT Government's [\*Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy\*](#) emphasises the importance of the first 1000 days of life. However, without coordinated, funded nutrition support, this critical window is being missed, and children's health and development outcomes continue to decline.

"A government-funded ACT Early Childhood Nutrition Hub would help bridge the gap between strategic intent and coordinated implementation of public health nutrition programs and services, supporting families and early childhood education and care services", Ms Elliston said.

More than half of children aged 0 to 5 years in the ACT attend early childhood education and care settings, underscoring the important role these environments play in shaping food exposure, learning and habits.

"These settings provide a valuable opportunity to bring together evidence, education and early intervention in a more coordinated way", says Ms Elliston.

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) strongly endorses the proposed ACT Nutrition Hub to support families and early childhood services in providing nutritious, age-appropriate food options for young children.

"The early years are when we lay the foundations for lifelong health and wellbeing and establish healthy attitudes and eating habits. This time is critical in preventing problems such as obesity and tooth decay down the track and providing support to families with challenges such as food refusal – before they become ingrained," says Samantha Page CEO of ECA.

Regular menu assessments, educator training and online support for ECEC services are among some of the key recommendations highlighted in Nutrition Australia ACT's budget submission to the ACT Government.

Director of Policy and Advocacy at YWCA, Leah Dwyer, says that as an Early Learning provider, YWCA Canberra recognises the importance of the first 1000 days in childhood development.

“Child wellbeing must be at the heart of all early learning services and an ACT Early Childhood Nutrition Hub can play an important role in ensuring that establishing healthy eating habits at an early age is part of this broader objective.”

Alongside comments from leaders across the early childhood sector, Tish Mercieca, President of the Canberra Mothercraft Society, said evidence presented by Nutrition Australia in the ACT, highlighting poor dietary intake among children, is cause for serious concern, while Dr Yvonne Luxford, CEO of the Perinatal Wellbeing Centre, said the first two years of life are a critical window where nutrition, maternal mental health and child development are deeply interconnected.

“Providing access to a central hub offering evidence-based programs designed and delivered by accredited practising dietitians will significantly educate parents and care providers on the key nutritional principles underpinning maternal and child health, benefiting families, said Ms Mercieca.”

“And for many mothers experiencing anxiety or depression, a coordinated Early Childhood Nutrition Hub would provide practical, trusted support alongside wellbeing services, helping families build healthy foundations during a vulnerable and formative period,” said Dr Luxford.

Leanne Elliston said the evidence and sector support are clear: investing in nutrition during the first five years of life is one of the most effective ways to improve children’s health, development, and lifelong wellbeing.

“Acting early is both a public health imperative and a smart investment in the future wellbeing of Canberra’s population.”

**ENDS**

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