

ACT Early Childhood Nutrition Hub

Budget Submission 2026 – at a glance

Purpose

The ACT Early Childhood Nutrition Hub proposes a coordinated, evidence-based approach to improve nutrition in the first five years of life - critical for physical growth, brain development, and lifelong health. This initiative addresses alarming trends in child health and wellbeing in the ACT and leverages early intervention to reduce chronic disease risk and long-term healthcare costs.

The Challenge

- 31.2% of ACT children are developmentally vulnerable or at risk in physical health and wellbeing vs 21.8% nationally.
- ACT ranks second lowest nationally for children on track across all five Australian Early Development Census domains (43.8% vs 52.9%).
- Almost 1 in 5 kindergarten children are overweight or obese whilst only 2.7% of 5-17-year-olds are meeting recommended vegetable intake.
- Fast-food consumption nearly doubled between 2011-2021.
- Preventable dental caries affects 25.3% of 5-6-year-olds.
- No ACT-wide nutrition standards or funded nutrition support in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, despite 54% of 0-5-year-olds attending childcare for 34 hours/week.

31.2%

Developmentally vulnerable or at risk



18.2%

Kindergarten children overweight or obese



2.7%

Meet vegetable intake



25.3%

Preventable dental caries



Identified Gaps

Fragmented and inconsistent nutrition messaging and information for families.



Centralised, evidence informed resources and culturally responsive programs for vulnerable families.

Lack of maternal nutrition support during pregnancy.



Feeding Healthy Futures® – antenatal and early childhood nutrition education.

Limited early intervention for atypical eating behaviours.



FEED Program – play-based therapy for children with feeding challenges.

No coordinated nutrition support for ECEC services.



Menu assessments, online training and nutrition support for 200 ECEC services reaching 16,370 children.

Proposed Solution

Investment and Impact



Indicative budget \$1.1M over 3 years

- Improved child development and maternal health.
- Reduced chronic disease risk and healthcare costs.
- Alignment with *ACT Wellbeing Framework, Best Start for Canberra's Children* and *National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030*.

Investing in the ACT Early Childhood Nutrition Hub will deliver cost-effective, preventive health measures that improve wellbeing, reduce future health expenditure, and position the ACT as a leader in early childhood nutrition.