

# Talking Circles: Exploring Children's Experiences and Preferences of Food Environments in Australian Outside School Hours Care (OSHC)

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**Abstract:** Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) settings provide an opportunity to support children's dietary behaviours; however, exploration of children's food experiences within OSHC nutrition environment remains limited. Despite the crucial role nutrition plays in children's development and their right to be involved in decision-making, their voices are often overlooked in nutrition research. Therefore, this study explored children's experiences and preferences of the nutrition environment through semi-structured focus group discussions (i.e. *Talking Circles*). Twenty-nine children (aged 5–12 years) from three Queensland, Australia OSHC services participated in seven *Talking Circles*. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured protocol grounded in the Socio-Ecological Model of Health, and children were encouraged to share through conversations and drawings. Data were analysed using the Framework Method, revealing three key themes: [1] Food Environment, [2] Food Preferences, and [3] Nutrition Education. Findings highlighted that food is central to children's experiences, offering nourishment, socialisation, and enjoyment; however, rigid policies and limited involvement in decision-making hinder engagement. Recommendations for future practice include involving children in food-related activities to foster the development of food agency and enhance their mealtime experiences. Alongside, greater integration of participatory approaches in nutrition research and practice to continue amplifying the voices of children.

**Keywords:** children's voices, nutrition environment, experience and preferences, extended education, school age care, outside school hours care.

## Introduction

Nutrition plays an important role in children's health and well-being, shaping their physical, cognitive, and emotional development and influencing their ability to actively engage in learning (Bellisle, 2004; Comeau et al., 2024; Shonkoff & Richmond, 2009). Despite this recognised importance, the 2022 National Health Survey reported that less than 5% of Australian children (aged 4–13 years) meet daily fruit and vegetable recommendations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). To improve children's dietary adequacy and overall well-being, greater attention must be given to understanding and optimising nutrition environments in settings where children spend significant time.

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Globally, millions of children participate in structured before and after school programs that support parents and caregivers to engage in work and study, while providing children with opportunities for recreation and enrichment activities beyond the school day. While such programs are defined and referred to differently across international contexts, including *Afterschool Programs* in the United States, *Extended Day Programs* in Canada, and *Extended Education* is commonly used international term, in Australia these services are often referred to as *Outside School Hours Care* (OSHC), while other terminology exists (Afterschool Alliance, 2025; Maher et al., 2025).

Australian OSHC services provide care to primary school-age children (aged 5–12 years) both before and after school, and during holiday periods (Cartmel, 2019; Woods et al., 2023). Approximately one in four Australian primary school-age children attends OSHC for an average of 12.6 hours per week, contributing to a substantial part of their time outside of school (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023; Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). Children who attend OSHC have the opportunity to engage in a range of enrichment activities (i.e. arts & crafts, board games, experiential learning, and recreation), physical activity (i.e. structured or unstructured play), and are provided with food and beverages (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Patel et al., 2025).

Within the Australian OSHC context, typically children will receive breakfast before school and an afternoon snack during the after school service (Crowe et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2025). This provision generally continues during holiday periods, while children and their caregivers are commonly responsible for providing lunch foods. While universal meal provisions are not common practice within Australian primary schools or OSHC services, it is a current area of interest and is gaining more attention within research and public health sectors (Aydin et al., 2023; Gingell et al., 2025). Food provision in Australian OSHC has been examined broadly over several years. In 2022, an observational study conducted by Crowe and colleagues of 89 Australian OSHC services during after school care, found that discretionary foods such as processed meats (i.e. chicken nuggets, hotdogs, luncheon meat), high salt/low fibre snacks (i.e. two minute noodles, chips), confectionery (i.e. cakes, biscuits), and discretionary dairy (i.e. ice-cream, custard) were offered to children more frequently than vegetables, dairy and lean meats. This observation is important to consider, as OSHC settings have the potential to play a key role in influencing children's dietary behaviours.

Food choices and dietary behaviours are shaped by a complex interplay of intrapersonal, social, physical, and political factors within nutrition environments, encompassed by the Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) of Health (Chan et al., 2022; Chen & Antonelli, 2020; Von Philipsborn et al., 2019). Settings where children spend significant amounts of time play a pivotal role in shaping dietary behaviours, as they provide social contexts, routines, and environmental cues that influence what, when, and how children eat. Within OSHC settings, the food environment, including the availability of foods, mealtime practices, routines, educator engagement, and peer interactions, can have a strong influence on children's dietary behaviours and overall relationships with food (Durão et al., 2023). OSHC therefore represents an important setting in children's lives, offering a unique opportunity to promote healthy eating, support positive food experiences, and foster lifelong health behaviours (Rowe et al., 2010; World Health Organization, 2024).

Nutrition research in OSHC internationally has broadly focused on improving dietary intake and food provisions, nutrition education, staff training and health promotion, and