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University of Idaho
Extension



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Introduction

Proper nutrition in the early years is important for children’s growth and development. This is a critical stage in life to build a positive relationship with food that will lay a strong foundation for healthy lifelong dietary patterns. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 59% of children aged five and younger, not enrolled in kindergarten, spent at least one day a week under the care of someone who was not their primary caregiver in 2019. Of these children, 62% attended a day care center, preschool, or prekindergarten center-based care. Offering guidance to early childcare providers on menu planning, setting a mealtime environment, nutrition education, and provider involvement or support can significantly impact children under their care.

Menu Planning

Dietary Guidelines for Americans (United States Department of Agriculture and Department of Health and Human Services 2020) outlines elements of a healthy dietary pattern that include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low-fat dairy, lean protein, and unsaturated fats, while limiting added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium. Offering a variety of fruits and vegetables each

week will provide diversity in tastes, textures, and nutritional content, contributing to a child's overall dietary intake. Eating legumes, such as beans, split peas, lentils, or chickpeas, one or more times per week helps young children attain the recommended legume intake of $\frac{1}{3}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ cup per week. Providing whole grains at least half of the time helps them to meet their daily grain intake. Serving water or low-fat milk at every meal helps limit added sugars whose amounts can be higher or even hidden in other beverages.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) MyPlate is an effective graphic and guide for meeting the dietary recommendations. Childcare providers can follow it by offering at least three of the following five components that make up MyPlate at breakfast and lunch: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy.

Trying new foods may intimidate children. One way to influence children's perceptions or expectations of a food and in turn encourage consumption of new foods is to give menu items descriptive or creative names. Including these names on the menu and sharing them with parents helps to create excitement and anticipation of trying new foods.

Mealtime Environment and Atmosphere

Mealtimes at childcare centers help children learn healthy habits, give them time to practice feeding themselves, explore new foods, and strengthen their ability to use age-appropriate utensils. Make the mealtime environment a positive and inviting experience by using appropriate lighting (not too bright or dark), turning off the television and other electronics, and avoiding disciplinary action during mealtime. Decorate the dining area — hang children's artwork, MyPlate posters, and/or other posters that promote healthy food and physical activity. Encourage parents to be present during mealtimes (recommended by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service [FNS]).

If local health and safety guidelines permit, offer family-style meal service for at least one meal or snack. Serving food family style allows children to eat familiar food and try new food, flavors, and textures together. Having adults at the table during mealtimes creates a significant teaching opportunity. By sitting together, children and adults exchange conversation as children build motor skills, learn table manners, and learn how to regulate their food intake.

FNS guidance and the Code of Federal Regulations recommend a variety of mealtime best practices:

- Provide children enough time to eat a meal or snack. Generally, 20–30 minutes is enough time for children to finish a meal or snack without feeling rushed; adjust the time according to the needs of your group.
- Provide guidance on hunger and fullness by asking children if they are hungry before offering a second helping.
- Not require children to eat everything on their plates nor praise them for finishing their food, which may lead to overeating.
- Include children in mealtime setup and cleanup to instill a sense of responsibility.

Nutrition Education

Integrating nutrition education and activities into childcare settings is an important part of promoting healthy eating habits among children. Nutrition education empowers children with the knowledge and skills needed to make healthy food and beverage choices. Providing children with opportunities to learn about food and gardening, for example, benefits their development and health in numerous ways. Children learn about the importance of consuming nutritious food. They learn about different food groups, including the nutritional value of fruits and vegetables and the benefits of eating whole grain and lean protein. This knowledge lays the foundation for making healthier food choices.

Similarly, engaging children in food-related activities fosters an appreciation of food — its origins and preparation. By learning about the source of food, such as through gardening, children develop an understanding of the effort that goes into growing and harvesting fresh produce. Their appreciation can lead to a greater willingness to try new foods and develop healthier eating habits. Childcare centers can create small gardens or plant pots where children can grow herbs, vegetables, or fruits. Involving children in planting, watering, and observing the growth process helps them to develop an appreciation for fresh produce and understand the connection between food and nature.

Other opportunities for nutrition education in childcare centers to promote curiosity and acceptance of new foods include the following:

- Partner with University Extension, registered dietitians, or community nutrition educators to offer formal classes.
- Conduct taste tests to explore different textures, flavors, and colors of healthy foods.
- Share recipes, information, or activities with parents to promote healthy foods at home.
- Coordinate parent meetings to discuss nutrition-related topics and encourage collaboration between home and childcare settings.

Provider Involvement and Support

Staff and providers at childcare facilities serve as models for establishing or maintaining healthy eating behaviors. The American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics agrees, noting that early learning facilities play an important role in helping children meet nutritional needs while promoting optimal growth in a safe and healthy environment. The Code of Federal Regulations recommends that childcare providers know the basic principles of child nutrition and healthy eating and abstain from expressing negative remarks or negative body language.

Additional best practices from the USDA's FNS recommend that staff provide ideas for creative and descriptive names for menu items and announce the menu at mealtime. Using Elyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Feeding, an evidenced-based approach to feeding young children, provides another best practice at mealtimes: adults manage the menu and when and where food is served, while children are responsible for how much they eat and whether or not to eat a meal or snack.

Following best practices, when staff sit at a table with children and eat the same food, they model appropriate mealtime behavior and healthy eating. Staff will also be available to assist children who need help during mealtimes. Staff can encourage but not push children to try foods and talk about their taste, texture, and color. The FNS also recommends that staff resist using food as a bribe, reward, or punishment.

Based on the Code of Federal Regulations for mealtimes, it is critical for staff to adhere to local food-handling and food-safety standards. Children are a vulnerable population with developing immune systems. Being mindful of food safety, foodborne illness, and food allergies keeps children safe and healthy.

Using the Healthy Mealtimes in Early Childcare Scorecard

The purpose of this scorecard is to provide an easily accessible list of best practices. Use it to identify areas where a childcare facility excels and needs improvement. It is best practice for childcare providers to use this scorecard for self-assessment as well as to work with an outside partner to provide a different perspective. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) providers and university Extension programs are two examples of potential strong outside partners. After completing the scorecard, both parties can compare results and work together to identify improvement strategies. Partners at SNAP-Ed and/or Extension may bring resources and dedicated staff to help facilitate sustainable changes.

Scorecard Form

Date _____ Site _____ Completed by _____

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Review scorecard before beginning.
2. Observe a meal period and check off statements that reflect the mealtime environment. Some of the items on the scorecard may not be observed in one mealtime. Include discussion with the providers and staff to determine implementation of items that were not observed. This is a collaborative process.
3. Create an action plan. Work with providers and staff to identify areas to improve.
4. Implement changes.
5. Observe another meal period and check off statements that reflect the mealtime environment. Talk with staff and providers about what worked well and how to sustain positive changes.
6. Celebrate successes and continue to create improvements.

MENU PLANNING (review the facility's menu)

- Offer at least 3 different fruits each week
- Offer at least 3 different vegetables each week
- Offer legumes one or more times per week
- Offer whole grains in at least half of the menus
- Offer water or low-fat milk at every meal
- Foods offered at breakfast and lunch include at least 3 components of MyPlate
- Available fruit options given creative or descriptive names
- Available vegetable options given creative or descriptive names
- Give the main dish a creative or descriptive name
- Include all creative or descriptive names in the childcare menu (published monthly)
- Post menus so they are available for all parents and staff

MEALTIME ENVIRONMENT/ ATMOSPHERE

- Display MyPlate in the classroom
- Prominently display in the dining area posters or pictures that promote healthy food and physical activity
- Display children's artwork in the dining areas
- Children wash hands before meals
- Serving utensils seem age appropriate
- Offer meals family style
- Eating utensils seem age appropriate
- Use child-sized chairs and tables
- Dining area is orderly and does not contain distracting clutter or cleaning materials
- Use lights appropriately to enhance the eating environment
- Children have enough time to eat without being rushed
- Children decide if and how much to eat
- Children participate in mealtime setup and cleanup routines
- Encourage parents to participate in, volunteer in, or observe the childcare mealtime environment

NUTRITION EDUCATION

- Provide children with opportunities to learn about food and gardening (planting a garden, seed planting, farm tours, nutrition education, etc.) at least once per year
- Offer nutrition education at least once per year
- Share recipes, information, or activities with parents to promote healthy foods at home at least once per year
- Conduct taste tests of different foods at least once per year

PROVIDER INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT

- Staff provide ideas for creative and descriptive names for menu items
- Staff announce the menu at mealtime
- Staff are trained in safe, food-handling practices
- Staff use recommended cleaning solutions to wipe down tables before mealtimes
- Staff sit at the table with the children and eat the same food
- Staff model appropriate mealtime behavior
- Staff encourage children to try foods without pressure or bribery
- Staff lead pleasant conversation with children during mealtime
- Staff avoid making comments about how much or how little food a child eats or if they clean their plate
- Staff talk about food taste, texture, colors, etc.

SCORECARD TOTALS

Menu_____ /11

Mealtime_____ /14

Nutrition_____ /4

Provider_____ /10

Grand Total_____ /39

Create an action plan for the top three areas to work on and implement.

Changes to Work On	Action Items to Complete	Person(s) to Complete	Date Completed

Examples of Strategies That Have Been Successful

MENU PLANNING

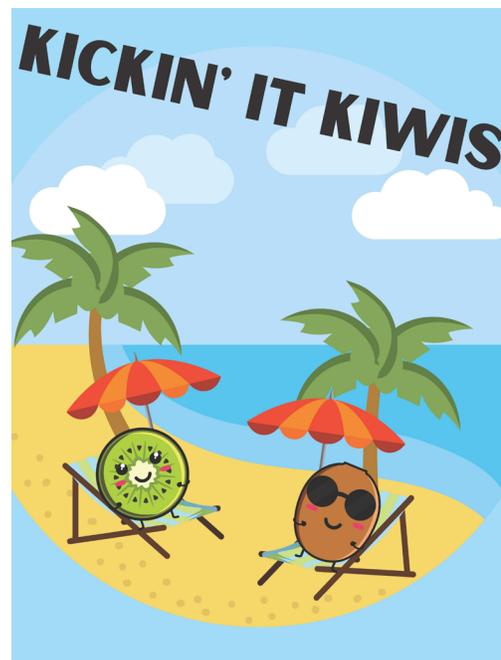
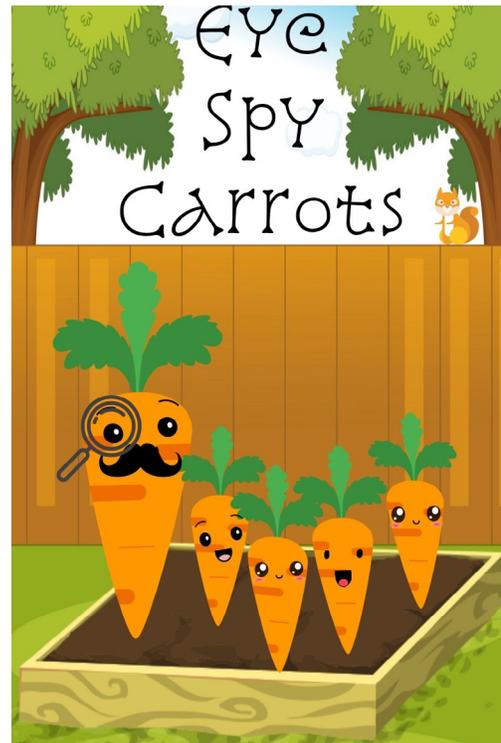
Educate staff on menu planning and nutrition basics. For example, include a variety of fruits and vegetables each week in menus, incorporate legumes at least once a week, ensure half the grains offered are whole grains, and include low-fat milk and water at all meals. Menu-planning resources are available through a variety of online resources, including the following:

- USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/meals-and-snacks>
- USDA Team Nutrition Child Care Organization: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/child-care-organization>
- Institute of Child Nutrition Recipe Box: <https://theicn.org/cnr/>

Involve staff and students. Including staff and students in the development of creative names for the main dishes, fruits, vegetables, and other items from the menu can be a great way to help them feel invested in the project. They can also help by distributing the updated menus to families, posting them at schools, and creating individual signs for each day's meal. Additional aids Eat Smart Idaho has used for food-renaming activities can be found in Smarter Lunchrooms Movement materials: <https://www.healthyeating.org/docs/default-source/3.0-our-cause/slm-pages/creative-fun-and-descriptive-names-for-foods.pdf>.

Use a set format for promotional menu signs that works best at your site. Some example formats for displaying the signs are flip charts, laminated Velcro signs that can be changed out as needed, and clear pockets on sneeze guards that the signs can be slipped into and changed out as needed.

Conduct research and apply for grants. Grants and other funding opportunities help to support mealtime and food-information displays. In Idaho, Dairy West, the Idaho Beef Council, the USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council, and the Idaho Potato Commission offer grants for materials, funding, and other resources. Helpful national grantors include the USDA, National Dairy Council, and 4-H.



MEALTIME ENVIRONMENT/ ATMOSPHERE

Use available resources. MyPlate, healthy food, and physical-activity resources such as posters and other signage are available from the USDA and state and national food councils and commissions. Many of these are available for free or at a low cost:

- USDA Team Nutrition: <https://pueblo.gpo.gov/TN/TNPubs.php>
- Visualz: <https://getvisualz.com/>
- Long Live Idaho Messaging Campaign images

Children's artwork. Have children create artwork and display it in the eating area.

Utilize university Extension resources. Gather information and resources from University Extension sites related to the preschool eating environment, the division of responsibility related to feeding young children, and parental involvement. Provide childcare staff with training or access to information on the importance of mealtime environment and atmosphere.

- Making Mealtimes in Childcare Pleasant, Easy, and Appealing: <https://childcare.extension.org/make-mealtimes-in-child-care-pleasant-easy-and-appealing/>
- Teaching Young Children to Serve Themselves in Group Settings: <https://www.joyfulnoisekids.com/pdfs/eatingfamilystyle.pdf>



NUTRITION EDUCATION

Partner with the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). The EFNEP operates through seventy-six land-grant universities. Contact the EFNEP provider in your state via the following link:

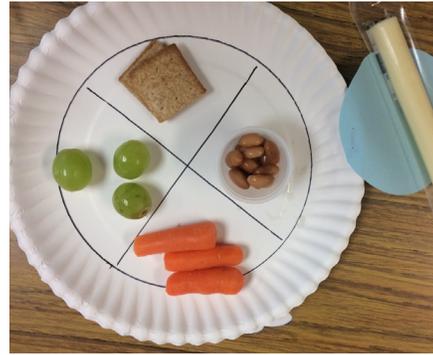
<https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/capacity-grants/expanded-food-nutrition-education-program-efnep/efnep-partner-websites>

Incorporate gardening. University Extension sites offer gardening education often through the Idaho Master Gardener Program. Contact your local county Extension site to see what is available. In Idaho, the Small Spaces Gardening project is offered at youth sites in Idaho, offering education and garden supplies.

Educate parents. The EFNEP provides direct nutrition, food resource management, and active living education to parent groups at qualified sites such as Head Start. Contact this program in your state:

- EFNEP: <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/efnep-partner-websites>

Other Extension professionals and registered dietitians may offer nutrition education programming. Check out land grant universities (<https://www.nifa.usda.gov/land-grant-colleges-and-universities-partner-website-directory?state=All&type=Extension&order=title&sort=asc>) to find an Extension professional in your state or search for a registered dietitian through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (<https://www.eatright.org/find-a-nutrition-expert>).



Utilize existing resources. The SNAP-Ed Connection and University Extension sites provide numerous recipes, newsletters, information sheets, and other publications.

- Various SNAP-Ed Connections Nutrition Education Materials: <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/nutrition-education/nutrition-education-materials>
- Recipes: <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/nutrition-education/snap-ed-recipes/recipes-snap-ed-partners> and <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/nutrition-education/snap-ed-recipes>
- University of Idaho Extension (keyword search: recipes): <https://www.uidaho.edu/extension/publications>
- Find a University Extension program in your state: <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/land-grant-colleges-and-universities-partner-website-directory?state=All&type=Extension&order=title&sort=asc>

Offer taste testing. Provide samples of different foods for children to try monthly. Check out UI Extension [BUL 1006](#), *Building Healthy Eating Habits through Taste Testing in Early Childcare Centers*, for more ideas. Sometimes grants are available through various food coalitions and commissions, the National Farm to School Network, and other organizations. Research the grants available in your area. In Idaho, the Harvest for Healthy Kids curriculum from Portland State University and the Mt. Hood Community College Head Start and Early Head Start Programs have been used to implement produce tastings and produce-based recipe tastings. The Harvest for Healthy Kids curriculum provides visuals and educational content for different produce, including how they grow and basic nutrition information related to each produce item. Access the curriculum at <https://mhccheadstart.org/harvest-for-healthy-kids/>. Find other resources on UI Extension's Farm to Early Care and Education website, <https://content-hub.uidaho.edu/api/public/a7d03489d7a84db3a15f720c4125a8a9?v=8999897c>



PROVIDER INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT

Educate staff. Provide education to childcare staff about the importance of their involvement with and support of Healthy Mealtime concepts (i.e., developing creative and descriptive food item names, modeling healthy behaviors, offering pleasant mealtime concepts related to feeding young children, etc.)

Share existing resources. Resources related to mealtime modeling, encouragement of trying new foods, pleasant conversation, etc., are available through the following U of I resources:

- Phrases that *Help* and *Hinder*: <https://myplate-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/2020-12/PhrasesThatHelpAndHinder.pdf>
- Tips for Childcare Providers to Promote Healthy Attitudes about Food: <https://childcare.extension.org/tips-for-child-care-providers-to-promote-healthy-attitudes-about-food/>
- Helping Children in Childcare Learn Healthy Eating Habits: <https://childcare.extension.org/helping-children-in-child-care-learn-healthy-eating-habits/>

Further Reading

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