

Child Care Plays a Critical Role

Child care settings can have a profound influence on the physical activity and dietary patterns of children, since many children spend major portions of their waking hours in child care settings. Child care settings can provide a healthy and supportive climate for children and their families.

Foods served can contribute positively to children's nutrition and learning. Meals and snacks provide opportunities for hands-on practice of food and nutrition concepts learned in the classroom, and make a statement about what is appropriate to eat. Foods served for meals and snacks, at parties and holidays, and foods allowed from home all provide nutrition messages. These choices can either broaden or limit children's awareness about foods and healthy eating.



Child care policies and practices can address nutritional, physical and emotional needs of children and specify how child care staff can serve as role models for children and parents. Food-related educational activities provide an opportunity for children to explore and expand their experience with food in a nurturing, positive atmosphere. Providing age-appropriate equipment and expressive play opportunities such as music, dance and drama and ensuring that outdoor play areas are available encourage active play and large-muscle development.

Ensuring Good Nutrition for Children in Child Care

Early education and child care programs have a responsibility to provide an optimal environment for growth and health. Regardless of the child care setting, providing quality nutrition services is essential for maximizing children's potential. Programs need to make sure children get enough to eat, and are provided with a balanced diet incorporating a wide variety of healthful foods. Following USDA's CACFP meal pattern guidance helps to ensure adequate nutrition for all young children, regardless of the child care setting or type of meal service (e.g., meals prepared on site, vended or brought from home).

