

# Best Practices for Nutrition, Physical Activity & Screen Media in Child Care Settings



Issue Brief #2 ♦ 2009

## The child care setting strongly influences child behavior and early habits.

Successful childhood obesity prevention efforts focus on creating healthy environments that make healthy choices possible. Research shows that nutrition, physical activity, and screen media behaviors are linked to a child's physical and social development.

This issue brief offers practical steps based on recommendations from leading researchers, clinicians, child care providers and others in the child care field. These best practices can serve as a guide for policy change in all types of child care settings. While some actions are easy to do, others increase costs and require additional effort. To fully implement these steps, child care providers will require more support, training, technical assistance, and funding from public and private sources.

- Children who receive CACFP meals eat healthier food than children who bring meals and snacks from home.<sup>1</sup>
- Adding portable play equipment to an outdoor preschool playground significantly increases physical activity in 3-5 year old boys and girls.<sup>2</sup>
- For 3 year olds, each one hour increment of TV viewing per day is linked to consumption of more sugar-sweetened beverages, fast food, and calories; and less fruit, vegetables, calcium, and fiber.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Make every calorie count by offering a variety of healthy foods.

Children's early experiences with food influence their preferences and consumption—they like what they know. Good eating habits come from exposure to healthy food and pleasant meal and snack times. Below are some specific measures that child care providers can take.

- Develop and follow a menu that includes a selection of nutritious foods.
- Include nutrition and feeding policies and practices in the orientation for new employees and regularly review policies with employees.
- Include a policy about foods brought from home in the parent guidebook.
- Find out if you are eligible for the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to help with food costs and menu planning.
- Provide meals, snacks, and beverages as suggested by a nutrition consultant, or as required by licensing or CACFP.



### Recommendations

- ✓ **Grain products:** Make most of your grains whole. Look on labels for the words whole wheat or whole oats, etc. These provide fiber to help digestion.
- ✓ **Vegetables:** Vary your veggies. Consider new ways to serve them. Use to introduce different colors, shapes and textures.
- ✓ **Fruits:** Try new colors. Choose fresh, frozen, canned or dried.
- ✓ **Meat & Meat Alternatives:** Choose lowfat or lean meats and limit high fat products (hot dogs, chicken nuggets, etc.). Try different types of bean products.
- ✓ **Milk products:** Go lowfat (1%) or fat free for children 2 years and older. Limit flavored milks.
- ✓ **Juice:** If you serve juice, make it 100% juice and only provide to children older than 12 months. Serve in cups not bottles and limit to 4 ounces per day.
- ✓ **Sweetened Beverages:** Avoid beverages with added sweeteners. Instead, offer milk to provide calcium and Vitamin D which are essential for bone growth.
- ✓ **Water:** Make water available at all times. Encourage water with snack and meal times.
- ✓ **Low-nutrition, high fat, high calorie foods:** Offer sparingly and provide healthy suggestions to parents for special events.

## 2. Create healthy meal and snack times.

- Serve food in common bowls and pitchers to pass around so children can serve themselves.
- Have adults eat with children for safety and to model healthy eating.
- Introduce new foods with familiar foods.
- Let the child decide how much to eat.

*Healthy meal times are not just about the food.*



## 3. Move throughout the day.

A child's health, development, and learning depend on getting physical activity every day.

- Offer 30-60 minutes of age-appropriate physical activity and play daily.
- Train teachers to engage and lead children in physical activities.
- Incorporate movement (stretching, dancing, marching, jumping, crawling) into all aspects of the curriculum, including transition times.
- Include policies in the parent handbook about outside play and physical activity. Ask parents to dress children in clothes that encourage active play. Keep extra mittens, hats, and coats on hand.

*Physical activity is more than exercise.*



## 4. Minimize Screen Media Time.

Even young children are widely exposed to screen media—television, video, video games, computers, phones—every day. The long term effects are unknown. However, research has linked TV viewing by young children to increased aggressive and antisocial behavior, lower academic performance, poor nutrition, obesity, and sleep disorders. Because of these adverse effects, the American Academy of Pediatrics ([www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)) recommends:

- No TV viewing for children younger than 2 years.
- Limit children's total media time for non-educational purposes to no more than 1-2 hours per day.
- Encourage active games, listening and moving to music, and creative play to foster interaction and help brain development.

*Less screen time means more time for play.*



### References

- <sup>1</sup> Bruening KS et al. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 1999 Dec;99(12):1529-35.
- <sup>2</sup> Hannon JC, Brown BB. *Preventive Medicine*. 2008 Jun;46(6):532-6.
- <sup>3</sup> Miller SA et al. *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity*. 2008;3(3):168-76.

For more information and tools to put these practices in action see [www.cphn.org](http://www.cphn.org)



Prepared by the University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition.  
Support for this project was provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.