



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Health and Wellness



Healthy Foods: Eating Well from the Ground Up

Strategies for Healthy Eating

Farms, Farmers Markets, and Grocery Stores

Having good nutrition improves children’s health by helping them grow, develop, and maintain a healthy weight. Being healthy also improves their self-esteem and well-being. When children are healthy, they are more able to learn and do well in school.

Early Head Start and Head Start programs serve healthy meals, teach children and families about healthy eating habits, and ensure that families have access to critical food assistance programs. Well-balanced meals, food security, and nutrition education has been an integral part of comprehensive health services since Head Start began. There are many strategies available that can help bring healthier food and a deeper understanding of nutrition to children and families that need it most.

Farmers markets and some specialty stores provide fresh, nutritious, locally grown fruits and vegetables. Children may be surprised to find that they like many fruits and vegetables. Field trips to farmers markets, working farms, or even grocery store produce departments are great ways to introduce children and families to fresh fruits and vegetables. With advance planning, farmers market vendors, farmers, and produce managers are often happy to “show and tell”—usually with tasty samples of their fruits and vegetables. They may share food samples and sometimes provide cooking demonstrations, too.



Specialty grocery stores may sell a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. For instance, stores specializing in Latino foods may offer items like jicama, tomatillo, and cactus. Stores specializing in Middle Eastern foods may have a bigger selection of beans, squashes, and okra than some families are used to seeing. Specialty grocery stores are great field trip destinations for children and adults. Children may be eager to try new foods they pick out. Teachers can use the foods the children choose as part of lesson plans and for healthy snacks that can be prepared in the classroom. Teachers can also encourage families to use the foods in recipes at home.



Start a Head Start Garden

Gardening exposes children to healthy foods with moderate physical activity and opportunities for positive social interactions. Picking fruits and vegetables, taking care of plants, or living near a garden as a child can have a positive impact (1). Children who grow their own foods are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables than those who do not (2). These healthy behaviors can last a lifetime (3,4). Gardening also teaches children about where food comes from and builds math and science skills. Children touch, smell, and taste the fruits and vegetables. They learn that fruits and vegetables are grown from plants or trees in the ground. Planting activities help children become familiar with different growing conditions and plants that produce fruits and vegetables. A study of children with learning disabilities who engaged in gardening found that they increased their nonverbal communication skills, developed awareness of the advantages of order, learned how to participate in a cooperative effort, and formed positive relationships with adults (5).

Gardening does not need to be expensive, but there are some costs involved. To begin with, you need seeds or starter plants, gardening tools, and a water source. Be sure there are some adult-sized tools as well as plenty that are child-sized too. Gardens can be either above ground in a raised garden bed or planted directly into the ground. If you decide on a raised planting bed, you need non-pressure-treated wood and good soil to fill the bed. If you choose to plant directly in the existing dirt, you need something to nourish the soil, like mulch or compost.



Local hardware stores, garden suppliers, and garden clubs may be willing to provide in-kind donations of labor, expertise, supplies, and equipment. Families who are gardeners are also great resources.

Gardening is good for children and adults. Staff and families benefit from both the physical activity and easy access to free or low-cost fruits and vegetables. If your program does not have space for a garden, consider getting involved with or promoting a nearby community garden.

Buy Your Food Locally

Two resources produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture can help Head Start programs find new, healthy sources of foods for meals and snacks. [Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs](#) is designed to guide programs in identifying and securing locally grown and produced food for nutrition programs. It includes information vital to a successful, open, fair, and competitive process.

[Farm to Preschool](#) is a natural extension of the farm-to-school model. It works to connect early care and education settings to local food producers with the objectives of serving locally grown, healthy foods to young children; improving child nutrition; and providing

related educational opportunities. Farm to Preschool offers many types of support for moving your program in this direction. It provides webinars, links to free curricula, gardening resources, family-education resources, and grant opportunities.

Gardening at the Oregon Child Development Coalition

When the Oregon Child Development Coalition (OCDC) made a commitment to incorporate gardening into all of its centers in 2007, it was unclear how each center would achieve this goal. OCDC is one of the nation's largest providers of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, Early Head Start, and Pre-Kindergarten Programs, serving over 4,000 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers throughout the state of Oregon. Some centers have ample land, accessible for vegetable growing and gardening – and some have very limited space. Despite these challenges, each center has launched successful programs that provide children with invaluable hands-on experiences that support learning and development.





Each OCDC center was given the freedom to incorporate gardens in their own way. OCDC's Ashland site, which has limited space, built a small container garden to grow herbs, which expose children to new sensory experiences of smell and taste. The staff paired this program with a field trip to a pumpkin patch to deepen the child's experience and understanding of growing food. The pumpkins gathered by the children became part of the lunch menu as a Shepherd's pie thanks to the collaboration between education staff and the Food Service Supervisor. OCDC's Umatilla site worked with a nearby landowner who donated land use, as well as volunteer master gardeners and community-donated supplies, to build a community garden that everyone can enjoy. Despite size limitations or other challenges, each garden adds immense value to the program and gardening remains a priority for OCDC's staff and families.

References

1. Gross H, Lane N. 2007. Landscapes of the lifespan: Exploring accounts of own gardens and gardening. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 27(3):225–241.

2. Lohr VI, Pearson-Mims CH. 2005. Children's active and passive interactions with plants influence their attitudes and actions toward trees and gardening as adults. *HortTechnology* 15(3):472–476.
3. Libman K. 2007. Growing youth growing food: How vegetable gardening influences young people's food consciousness and eating habits. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication* 6(1): 87–95.
4. Lineberger SE, Zajicek JM. 2000. School gardens: Can a hands-on teaching tool affect students' attitudes and behaviors regarding fruit and vegetables? *HortTechnology* 10(3):593–597.
5. Bell AC, Dymont JE. 2008. Grounds for health: The intersection of green school grounds and health-promoting schools. *Environmental Education Research* 14(1):77–90.





Additional Resources

[Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#) – Food and nutrition experts help users find accurate information to support a healthful lifestyle.

[American Community Gardening Association](#) – Supports community gardening by facilitating community gardening networks; developing resources; encouraging research and conducting educational programs.

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Community Gardens](#) – Part of the CDC Healthy Community Design Initiative links to research and resources promoting gardening.

[Cook's Corner: Recipes for Healthy Snacks](#) – Find simple recipes for healthy snacks that young children can make in Head Start programs or at home with their families. Recipes appeared in *Brush Up on Oral Health* issues published between 2012 and 2017.

[Food for Thought: Eating Well on a Budget](#) – Bilingual, multimedia program to support families with young children coping with food insecurity.

[Harvest for Healthy Kids](#) – Eight free preschool activity kits featuring beets, asparagus, winter squash, cabbage, berries, potatoes and sweet potatoes, carrots, and winter root vegetables.

[Healthy Eating: Health Tips for Families](#) – Available in multiple languages, this tip sheet teaches families healthy eating behaviors starting in infancy.

[The Positive Eating Environment Tool](#) – An interactive tool used to create an action plan and includes recommended practices to create a positive eating environment that supports children's healthy growth and development.





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View other topics in the Embracing Health and Wellness Series on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/article/embracing-health-wellness-series>

Our Goal: To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within the areas of medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

Contact Us: The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback as well as your suggestions for topics for future resources! Please forward your comments to: health@ecetta.info or call us at 888-227-5125.

School readiness begins with health!