



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Health and Wellness



Childhood Obesity

September is National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month and a good time to remember the significant health challenges associated with excess weight, as well as ways to prevent children from becoming overweight or obese. Per the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), “With more than 1 in 5 U.S. children ages 2 – 5 years already overweight or obese, prevention efforts must target our youngest children.”

There are a number of factors that impact a child’s health. For example, they may live in a neighborhood that does not have access to safe places to play or their family has a lower socioeconomic status. These are referred to as social determinants of health. Some groups of people are more vulnerable to these social determinants of health, and therefore may experience higher rates of diseases than other people. These are called health disparities, and health disparities lead to health inequities. There

are also certain groups of people that experience higher rates of obesity due to these factors, which leads to health disparities.

For example, children who are Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black experience higher rates of overweight and obesity, compared to their peers.¹

Children who have obesity are more likely to have obesity as adults, which can lead to lifelong physical and mental health problems, including diabetes and an increased risk of certain cancers. Although there are many factors that influence childhood obesity, too much screen time, lack of mealtime routines, and lack of access to affordable, healthier foods all contribute to excess weight.

[1. Skinner AC, Ravanbakht SN, Skelton JA, Perrin EM, Armstrong SC. Prevalence of Obesity and Severe Obesity in US Children, 1999–2016. *Pediatrics*. 2018;141\(3\):e20173459 - September 01, 2018](#)



With children spending most of their time outside of the home, early care and education (ECE) programs play a critical role in the health and well-being of the children they serve. It is imperative to develop tips and strategies to share with families on building the right foundation for healthy active living.

Healthy active living starts with nutrition, which is very much influenced by the environment in which a child lives and play. Healthy eating is essential to a child's well-being. Early care and education programs can [encourage healthy eating habits](#) by providing additional support resources for staff to share with families.

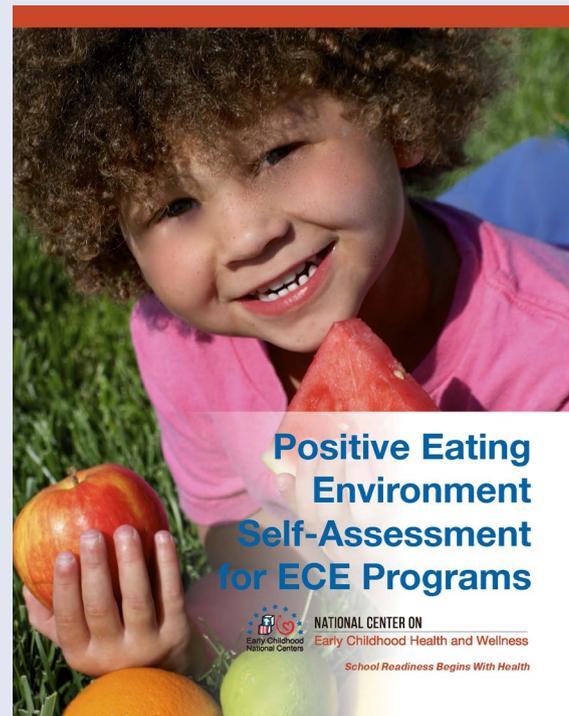
Tools for Early Care and Education Programs/What Programs Can Do

Create a Positive Eating Environment

Enhancing eating environments is an important way to help children develop healthy habits that will last a lifetime. Efforts in ECE programs may lead to improved nutrition, healthy mealtime routines, and increased awareness among children about nutritious foods. Early care and education programs can put policies

and practices into place to help guide and reinforce the commitment to creating positive mealtime environments. Efforts and success should be shared with staff and families in a planned way.

The [Positive Eating Environment Self-Assessment](#) for ECE Programs is a brief, user-friendly assessment of basic mealtime practices designed to help ECE programs evaluate the availability of healthy nutrition and mealtime environments. This tool can be used for staff discussions and policy planning. It is also useful for ECE trainers or technical assistance providers.





Growing Healthy: A Guide for Head Start Health Managers

The [*Growing Healthy: A Guide for Head Start Health Managers and Families about Healthy Active Living for Young Children*](#) flip chart is designed to help health managers discover talking points for additional staff and home visitors to use with families when discussing how to develop healthy meal routines. It provides suggestions for building healthy active lives.

Healthy Eating: Tips for Families

There is growing research that shows eating habits begin early in a child's life, even before birth. Explore this [fact sheet](#) for guidance on healthy eating to share with families. It offers easy tips to help children learn healthy eating behaviors starting in infancy so they can become lifelong habits.

Movement as a Learning Tool

Studies suggest that preschool-aged children with low levels of active play are already experiencing adverse health effects, such as higher cholesterol levels and body mass indexes. Furthermore, children learn through play, which enhances attention, memory, self-regulation, and overall academic achievement throughout childhood.

It's important to find ways to incorporate movement throughout the day to combat sedentary behaviors and facilitate healthy brain development. One resource that might be helpful to programs is the [Let's Talk About Movement](#), which provides quick and easy ideas for integrating movement, nutrition, and healthy habits into everyday life.

Why play? [The American Academy of Pediatrics policy on play](#) lists some of the benefits of play as

- Support for healthy brain development
- Encourages infants and toddlers to engage in and interact with their environment
- Allows children to safely explore their fears and practice adult roles
- A way for children to build relationships with their peers and caregivers



Other Health Factors

There are a lot of overall factors that can influence the weight and overall health of children and their family, such as sleep and screen time. Early care and education programs are in a unique position to offer intervention and prevention for many health behaviors. It's important to remember that [healthy children are ready to learn](#).

Comprehensive national standards for ECE programs, including standards for obesity prevention that address nutrition, infant feeding, physical activity, and screen time, can be found in [Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards](#).

Families with low-income and who experience food insecurity are especially vulnerable for poor nutrition and obesity. [Food insecurity](#) is when families have limited or uncertain availability of healthy and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. Food insecurity and obesity can co-exist in the same individual, family, or community. Children are especially vulnerable because their unique health and developmental needs.



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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!