



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health

January 2015
Volume 2, Issue 1

Health Services Newsletter

HEALTHY FOODS FROM THE GROUND UP

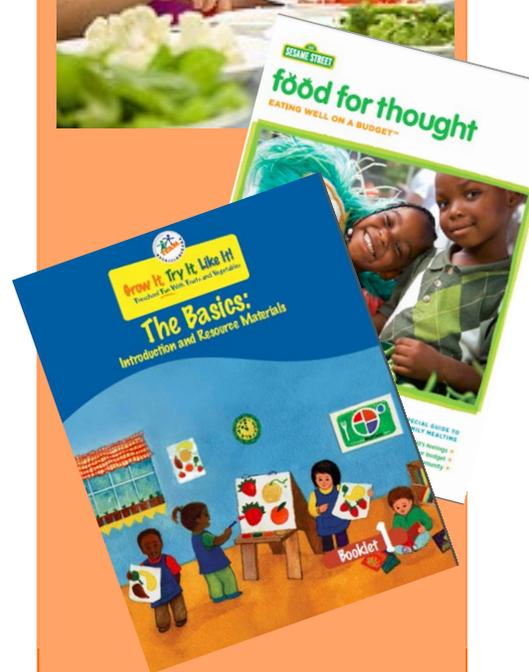
Having good nutrition improves children's health by helping them grow, develop, and maintain a healthy weight. Being healthy also improves their self-esteem and well-being. When children are healthy, they are more able to learn and do well in school.

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. Nutrition, including well-balanced meals, food security, and nutrition education, has been an integral part of comprehensive health services since Head Start began. This issue features three strategies that may help you bring healthier food and a deeper understanding of nutrition to children and families that need it most.

Strategy 1. Visit Farmers Markets, Farms, and Grocery/Specialty Stores

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 and specialty stores 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 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 stores are great field trip destinations for children and adults.



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Resources

Use the [USDA Farmers Markets Directory Search](#) to find a farmers' market near you.

Most farmers' markets accept [SNAP](#) and WIC [Farmers' Market Nutrition Program](#) vouchers for fruits and vegetables.

[Nutrition.gov](#) offers resources such as videos with registered dietitians, information about food safety, and a seasonal produce guide.



(photo courtesy of Western Growers Foundation)

Children may be eager to try new foods they picked 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 to eat at home.

Strategy 2. Start a Head Start Garden

Gardening exposes children to healthy foods with moderate physical activity and opportunities for positive social interactions.¹ Picking fruits and vegetables, taking care of plants, or living near a garden as a child can have a positive impact.² Children who grow their own foods are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables than those who do not.^{3,4} These healthy behaviors can last a lifetime.

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. Curricula such as [Grow It, Try It, Like It!](#) and [Resource Guide for Preschool Gardens](#) are great ways to learn about gardening and nutrition and how they connect to school readiness.

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. And you need tools like spades, hoes, rakes, and a hose or water bucket. Be sure there are some adult-sized tools as well as plenty that are child-sized too. 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 (and their members) may be willing to provide in-kind donations of labor, expertise, or supplies and equipment. The local [Cooperative Extension System Offices](#) can be helpful. 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.



“As OCDC continues to explore ways to help families thrive, it has become clear the center gardens will play a catalytic role helping staff and families find new community-driven solutions that address issues surrounding hunger and food insecurity.”

-Karen Ayers, Program and Partnership Manager

Gardening at the Oregon Child Development Coalition

When the Oregon Child Development Coalition (OCDC) made a commitment to incorporating 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.



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(photo courtesy of Farm to Preschool)

Strategy 3. 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 procuring 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. [A Guide to Farm to Preschool in Home-Based Child Care Sites](#) is also available.

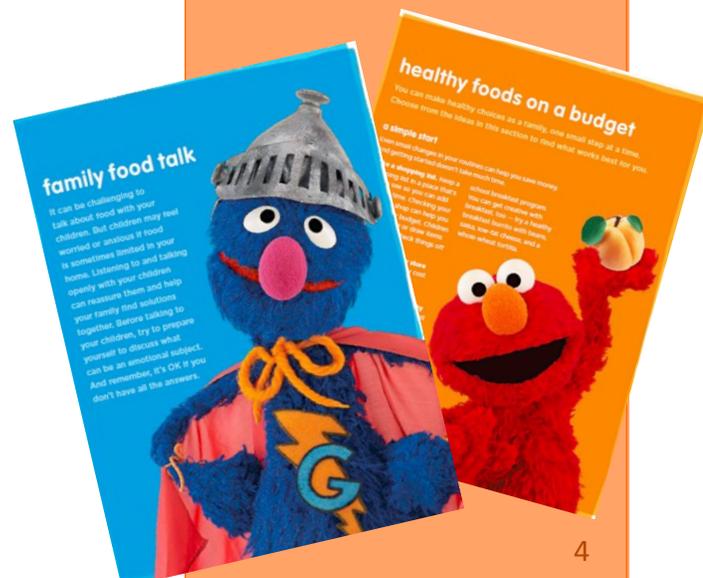
RESOURCES

[The U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Food and Nutrition Services \(FNS\) Child and Adult Care Food Program](#) subsidize meals and snacks.

[The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children \(WIC\)](#) and the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#), formerly the Food Stamps Program, help families with food assistance.

Grantee community assessment data identify local agencies, such as [food banks and food pantries](#), that can help strengthen a family's food security.

Early Head Start programs promote the low-cost, nutrition-rich strategy of [breast feeding](#).



RESOURCES

[Nature Based Learning and Development](#) – Positive ways Head Start and Early Head Start programs can include nature in their activities.

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

- [Become a Savvy Farmers Market Shopper](#)
- [Kids in the Garden: Nutritious and Fun](#)
- [Shop Farmers Markets](#)

[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.

[Early Sprouts](#) – A curriculum and teacher resources to engage preschoolers in gardening, sensory exploration, and cooking throughout the year.

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

[Free Plant](#) – The Freeplant Network Worldwide distributes free flowers, plants, seeds, and bulbs.

[The Hayride: A Resource for Educational Farm Field Trips](#) – information about farm field trip logistics, how to connect field trips to classroom curriculum, and other resources.

[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.

[Kids Gardening](#) – Curricula, lesson plans, family activities and funding opportunities from the National Gardening Association.

[No Kid Hungry](#) – Advocacy and resources to promote safe and community-based solutions to hunger including *Cooking Matters* to get the most out of federal food and nutrition programs.

[School Garden Checklist](#) – The basics for starting a school garden from www.letsmove.gov.

Fostering a culture of health and wellness for Head Start children, families, and staff.

NATIONAL CENTER ON HEALTH

Our Goal:

To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within 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.

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School readiness begins with health!