

It's 12 O'clock...

What Are Our Preschoolers Eating For Lunch?

An Assessment of Nutrition and the Nutrition Environment in
Licensed Child Care in Los Angeles County

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Public Health Foundation Enterprises – WIC
Child Care Food Program Roundtable
California Food Policy Advocates

Funded by the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Health Foundation Enterprises-WIC, the Child Care Food Program Roundtable, and California Food Policy Advocates received funding from The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation to conduct an assessment of the nutrition environment of licensed child care settings in Los Angeles County.

Almost 40 percent of children aged zero to five in Los Angeles County, or nearly 350,000 children, spend most of their day in child care. These children consume a significant portion of their daily nutrition in these child care settings. However, there is a paucity of research on the nutrition environments in child care, a fact particularly striking given the alarming rise in obesity in this age group and the developing knowledge that the first five years of life are particularly critical in developing dietary patterns that set the stage for a lifetime of healthy eating.

By observing the foods and beverages served in licensed child care settings, the goal of the assessment was to produce evidence-based recommendations to strengthen the nutritional environment in these settings. Researchers conducted observations of the lunch service at 54 licensed child care sites in Los Angeles County. In addition to observing the food served to children, observations were made of the feeding environment and practices surrounding food service. Finally, a number of key stakeholder interviews were conducted to provide a background and narrative to the observational visits.

Key Findings

Research revealed a range of practices with respect to nutrition and mealtime behaviors across different types of child care settings. In general, locally-sponsored child care centers participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Head Start centers had the best meal quality. Food brought from home had the worst meal quality. On average, lunches contained 1.43 servings of healthfully prepared fruits and vegetables. Nearly all (92 percent) of the sites served milk, with 80 percent serving reduced fat or skim milk, but few served water, as well. Only 22 percent of sites served whole grains. Forty-seven percent of sites served high-fat meats while 34 percent served lean meats. In general, the sites in which providers and children participated in the preparation, serving, and consumption of lunches were associated with a higher meal quality.

Policy Recommendations

1. IMPROVE NUTRITION IN ALL LICENSED CHILD CARE.

The State Legislature should:

- a. Enact changes to state licensing requirements to improve nutrition and physical activity, such as requiring nutrition standards for foods and beverages served in child care and establishing minimum physical activity requirements.
- b. Promote nutrition and physical activity in child care by emphasizing these components in compulsory licensing trainings and monitoring visits.

2. IMPROVE NUTRITION IN LICENSE-EXEMPT CARE

Local policymakers should:

- a. Identify public resources supporting licensed-exempt child care providers.
- b. Offer training, menu planning assistance and nutrition education to license-exempt providers.
- c. Develop and implement a plan to condition subsidies to license-exempt providers upon compliance with minimum standards of nutrition and physical activity.

3. IMPROVE NUTRITION IN CACFP

Congress and USDA should:

- a. Provide higher CACFP reimbursement tied to improved CACFP nutrition standards.
- b. Require CACFP sponsors to provide nutrition education in exchange for higher administrative reimbursement.
- c. Require CACFP-participating facilities to adopt mealtime behaviors and practices associated with healthier eating.
- d. Strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of CACFP centers that are not sponsored by an independent agency.

The state Legislature and CDE/NSD should:

- a. Provide higher state CACFP reimbursement tied to improved nutrition standards and more healthful mealtime behaviors and practices.

4. SIMPLIFY THE CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM

Congress and USDA should:

- a. Reduce paperwork requirements on both providers and sponsors.
- b. Re-evaluate separation of reimbursement claims into Tier 1 and Tier 2 rates.
- c. Provide schools that operate both the National School Lunch Program and CACFP the authority to operate CACFP under NSLP rules and regulations.

5. STRENGTHEN PROVIDERS' CAPACITY TO IMPROVE NUTRITION SERVICE

Local policymakers and organizations (LA County, LA City, School Districts, First5LA, LA Universal Preschool and local WIC agencies) should:

- a. Measure nutrition and physical activity practices as an indicator of quality care.
- b. Develop a standardized, peer-to-peer nutrition training for child care providers.
- c. Coordinate nutrition education messages.
- d. Include child care-related nutrition education in WIC counseling sessions.

6. MOBILIZE LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES IN LOS ANGELES TO STRENGTHEN EARLY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENTS

School districts should:

- a. Include all their eligible pupils aged 0-5 in their Network for a Healthy California contracts, so that resources, materials and curricula can add support for the staff and students attending those sites.
- b. Use bond funds to improve nutrition and activity environments.
- c. Should assess the feasibility of CACFP for non-school program sites.