



Making the Most of ECE Program Meals

The tips listed below coincide with the “Making the Most of ECE Program Meals” webinar and provide recommendations for working with food vendors to provide healthy meals to early care and education programs.

- Many states' licensing requirements require that nutritious meals be offered that follow the CACFP meal pattern.
- Sites can qualify in one of two ways to participate in the Child Care and Adult Food Program (CACFP):
 1. Non-profit sites can participate regardless of income status of families served.
 2. For-profit sites can participate if they serve at least 25% low income children as defined by at or below 130% of the federal poverty level.
- CACFP is intended to be a *partial* reimbursement program that enhances nutrition and quality care.
 - The reimbursement rate is based on family income in the free, reduced, or paid categories.
- Programs that have children bring lunches from home can still participate in CACFP by offering a meal or snack supported by CACFP. That meal might be breakfast and the children bring food from home for lunch.
 - It is important to remember that if you participate in CACFP you cannot ask parents for money for food and you cannot use parent provided food for CACFP claimed meals.
- If programs are not being reimbursed for lunch and have a number of children bringing in their own lunches, then providers can still participate in family-style dining.
 - For example, parents or program staff can take turns bringing in a whole fruit or vegetables and the program staff can cut it up for lunch. The pieces of produce can be placed in a child size bowl with appropriate serving utensils. Therefore, the children can still practice family-style dining by passing the bowl around and serving themselves at least one component of lunch.
 - Remember, food must be cut up at the program, not beforehand, due to food safety regulations. Always follow local food safety requirements and standards.
- Revise cycle menus to have “no cook” meals twice a week, and have deliveries the other three days.
- Document any push back from vendors.
- Contact the vendor management team to negotiate, rather than the delivery person.
- Find other providers that are using the same vendor and work together to negotiate changes in menus for all programs served.
- Find a group purchasing organization (GPO) in your area by contacting your local school district food service director.
- Keep daily food records.
- Cut costs by:
 - Substituting protein sources 1x/week (i.e. beans instead of meat).
 - Ensuring proper portions are being served.
 - Purchasing produce in season.
- Find a vendor that offers products with “Child Nutrition” labeling.
- Ask people and places in your community for food vendor referrals: local and state agencies, child care facilities, schools, hospitals, restaurants, and assisted living and long-term care facilities.



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