

Children Facing Food Insecurity



Having enough good quality food to feed our families is something many people take for granted. However, one in five U.S. families does not have access at all times to enough food to live a healthy, active life.ⁱ Families facing this hardship report many challenges: few kinds of low-cost foods; an inability to provide balanced meals for children; reducing the size of children's meals; children are not eating enough to meet their dietary needs, must skip meals, and even sometimes go hungry.

How Food Insecurity Affects Children in Early Care and Education Programs

A nutritious and varied diet is crucial for children's optimal growth, development and learning. Children in families experiencing food insecurity are at greater risk for poor child attachment, overweight, developmental delay, poor health, emotional and behavioral problems, hospitalization, and chronic health conditions. Children who are food insecure are likely to be living with profound stress. Some may want to talk to you about their feelings. If this happens, listen thoughtfully, reassure them that there will always be food in your program, and that you will do your best to help.

Hunger can make children irritable, anxious or fearful. It can make it hard for them to concentrate, and make them very fixated on food and eating. If your program provides meals, you may notice food insecure children hiding food in their pockets, asking for more, or refusing to pass food to other children. Here are some suggestions to support food insecure children your program:ⁱⁱ

- Create a snack station with healthy food that children can easily access themselves (fruits and vegetables, unsweetened dried cereal, whole grain crackers, etc.)
- Have extra food available on Mondays and on Fridays. Weekends are often times when food insecure children do not get enough to eat. Many food pantries provide backpacks that are filled with non-perishable foods and can go home with children to the families each Friday.
- Establish a weekly Farmers' Market where children and families can spend vouchers (from the program through donations or grant funding or from SNAP) to buy fresh, healthy, low-cost foods that the children are learning about in the program each week.
- If you serve family-style meals, help each child learn how much to take for their first serving. Be sure to prepare enough so children can have second helpings if they are still hungry.
- Include weekly or daily nutrition education so that all of the children in your program have opportunities to learn about, prepare and taste healthy foods.
- Create a vegetable garden. Integrate gardening (and harvesting) into your lesson planning and daily schedule. Some programs have used gardening with children as a way to involve families and teach them the skills they need to garden at home.

- Work collaboratively with staff, families and teachers to make your program a compassionate community. Teach the children to share and care for their friends.
- Make a list of community resources that can help families with food. Distribute it to all families or display in a visible place in your program, to avoid singling out certain families.
- Display brochures/posters from resource agencies for parents to see or take as needed.
- Offer workshops on topics of interest to most families at a time that works for them. Some examples include: healthy cooking on a budget, shopping strategies, top 10 no-cook foods for healthy meals, family recipe exchange, easy gardening with kids, etc.

Working with Families

Children are often aware of food insecurity at home, even if parents try to shield them from it. Some children try to improve their family's situation by not asking for snacks, not eating between meals, trying to earn money for food, and eating less when food is running low.ⁱⁱⁱ This is why it is so important to build some of the above opportunities into your program.

Food insecurity is a sensitive issue and should be handled kindly, thoughtfully, and privately. Families who are newly facing food shortages may be embarrassed by their situation. Talk to parents, not children, if you suspect that a family may be struggling with food security. Listen to their concerns, learn what they think would help, and try to connect them to appropriate resources.

Resources

- **CACFP** provides nutritious meals and snacks for low-income children in child care and after-school programming. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/care/>
- **Food For Thought: Eating Well on a Budget** is a bilingual, multimedia program designed for families with children ages 2-8 and are coping with uncertain or limited access to affordable and nutritious food. <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/food>
- **WIC** provides food, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant women; for women who have recently had babies; and for babies and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk. Visit <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic>.
- **SNAP** is the federal government's food stamp program. Visit www.fns.usda.gov/snap.
- **Feeding America** has a network of food banks. Visit www.feedingamerica.org.
- **School Lunch Program** provides children in grades K-12 free or lower-price lunches at school. Some schools also serve breakfast, after-school snacks, fruits and vegetables, and summer meals. Ask someone at your child's school office to apply, or visit www.fns.usda.gov/cnd.
- **Meals on Wheels** feeds those who are 60 years of age and older and those in need. MOWAA's vision is to end senior hunger by 2020. Visit www.mowaa.org.

ⁱ Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, William McFall and Mark Nord. *Food Insecurity in Households With Children: Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics, 2010-11*, EIB-113, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, May 2013.

ⁱⁱ Sigman-Grant, Madeline. Food Insecurity and Child Care. Accessed September 18, 2013 from http://www.healthychild.net/NutritionAction.php?article_id=518

ⁱⁱⁱ Fram, Maryah Stella, Edward A. Frongillo, Sonya J. Jones, Roger C. Williams, Michael P. Burke, Kendra P. DeLoach, and Christine E. Blake. 2011. "Children are aware of food insecurity and take responsibility for managing food resources," *The Journal of Nutrition* 141(6): 1114-19.