On the road to a brighter future

How child care providers are following best practices in nutrition and physical activity

Child care providers do critically important work. They keep our kids safe and meet their daily needs. They also help children develop eating and physical activity habits that stick with them throughout their lives. These habits have a huge impact on whether a child becomes a healthy adult.

University of Minnesota researchers set out to see if Minnesota child care providers are following recommended nutrition and physical activity best practices. They surveyed licensed center- and home-based providers in 2010 and again in 2016. This report is a summary of the study results.
Providers have improved in many areas

Compare the solid area (2016 scores) to the line (2010 scores) to see the progress providers have made. Overall, scores are significantly higher in 2016.

- **Allow children to decide when they are full during eating times**
  - 75% of homes (25% increase)
  - 85% of centers (16% increase)

- **Serve only white, low-fat milk to children 2 years of age and older**
  - 80% of homes (25% increase)
  - 70% of centers (27% increase)

- **Serve at least 1 fruit or non-fried vegetable at every meal and snack**
  - 66% of homes (8% increase)
  - 58% of centers (18% increase)

- **Teach kids about physical activity 3 or more times a year**
  - 43% of homes (21% increase)
  - 67% of centers (27% increase)

- **Serve high-sugar foods less than once per week**
  - 47% of homes (25% increase)
  - 47% of centers (7% increase)

- **Provide at least 1 hour a day of active play**
  - 69% of homes (no change)
  - 80% of centers (23% increase)

- **Limit TV and computer time to less than 60 minutes per day**
  - 88% of homes (13% increase)
  - 71% of centers (23% increase)

The numbers presented are percent differences. The yellow and pink graphs show data from the 215 providers who responded in both 2010 and 2016. The blue graph shows data from the 618 providers who responded in 2016.
More gains are within reach

Providers said they could start these new practices fairly easily. Because few currently do these, there is great potential for improvement.

- **Serve low-sodium meals or snacks daily**
  - 37% said they could do this
  - 28% are doing this

- **Serve only whole-grain food**
  - 34% said they could do this
  - 33% are doing this

- **Attend healthy eating and nutrition training once a year**
  - 41% said they could do this
  - 33% are doing this

- **Attend physical activity training once a year**
  - 46% said they could do this
  - 30% are doing this

- **Write a policy on healthy nutrition**
  - 42% said they could do this
  - 35% are doing this

- **Write a policy on physical activity**
  - 45% said they could do this
  - 34% are doing this

Providers said these are the most common factors that get in the way of best practices.

### Nutrition

- **High cost of nutritious food**
  - 72% of centers
  - 74% of homes

- **Fresh food spoils quicker**
  - 43% of centers
  - 40% of homes

- **Worried children won’t like nutritious food**
  - 22% of centers
  - 47% of homes

### Activity

- **Bad weather**
  - 63% of centers
  - 81% of homes

- **Children don’t have appropriate clothing**
  - 47% of centers
  - 54% of homes

- **High cost of equipment**
  - 47% of centers
  - 48% of homes
### What you can do

**Child Care Providers**

- Make regular training a priority—you or your staff will come back refreshed, recharged, and full of new ideas to incorporate healthy eating and physical activity into the daily routine for the children in your care.

- Create a nutrition or physical activity policy to guide the care you provide. Consider involving parents in writing the policy.

- If cost is a barrier to providing healthy food options, think creatively about how you purchase food. Many providers make use of farmers markets, cooperative purchasing, and farm-to-table options.

- Consider participating in federal child nutrition programs.

**Parents**

- Support active play at school by sending your child with appropriate gear for the ever-changing weather.

- Encourage your child to try new, healthy food options at home and at school.

- Consider leading or assisting with the development of a policy on healthy nutrition and physical activity to guide best practices at your child’s day care.

- Connect with other parents or caregivers who care about these issues.

**Advocates**

- Learn more about resources available; identify how systems could be improved to make healthy options more accessible.

- Talk to leaders in your community about ways to support providers in creating healthy opportunities.

- Help connect providers to accessible, inexpensive and easy trainings and resources.

- Support federal child nutrition programs.

- Start by building relationships with providers and agencies in your area—especially those serving families facing disparities.

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