

# Nutrition and Physical Activity Best Practices for Child Care Centers

Early childhood is a critical time for cognitive, social, physical and motor skill development. By adopting these *recommended* practices child care centers will:

1. Contribute to child health and help prevent chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease
2. Supplement nutrition in the home and community
3. Include opportunities for physical activity

## I. Nutrition Guidelines for Child Care Centers

The following nutrition guidelines are *recommended* by the New York City Health Code, New York City Food Standards or USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). For Head Start Programs, some of the practices listed below are required and supported by the Head Start Performance Standards.

### A. Meal and Snack Guidelines

- Offer a variety of healthy food, including whole grains, vegetables, fruits, lean meat and meat alternatives (eggs, nuts, seeds, beans and peas), and milk and milk products (yogurt and cheese). The USDA's "ChooseMyPlate" shows the kind and amount of food to eat each day. Go to [choosemyplate.gov](http://choosemyplate.gov) for more information.
- Part-day programs should provide one-third of a child's nutritional needs. Full-day programs should provide one-half to two-thirds. CACFP has guidelines for meal and snack options. Visit [health.ny.gov](http://health.ny.gov) and search "child healthy meal pattern" for more information.
- Offer snacks that contribute to a child's nutrition and health.
- Vary meal and snack portions based on different ages.

#### Offer Plenty of Fruits and Vegetables

- Vegetables and fruits can be fresh, frozen or canned. They should be prepared without added sugar and with limited added salt or fat.
- At least one of the two required lunch and dinner vegetable/fruit servings should be a vegetable.
- At least one of the daily vegetable/fruit servings should be high in vitamin C. For example, try bell peppers, broccoli, cabbage, cantaloupe, cauliflower, grapefruit, kiwi, oranges, okra, pineapple, spinach, summer squash, strawberries, sweet potato, tangerines, tomato and watermelon.
- At least three of the weekly vegetable/fruit servings should be high in vitamin A. For example, try apricots, cabbage, cantaloupe, carrots, collard greens, grapefruit, leaf and romaine lettuce, mango, spinach, sweet potato, tomato and watermelon.
- At least three of the weekly vegetable/fruit servings should be fresh (not frozen or canned).

#### Serve Healthy Beverages

- If you serve juice, only serve 100% juice. Check the ingredient list for "100% juice." Avoid "juice drinks" and drinks labeled "100% Vitamin C" because they probably have added sugar.
- Make water available and easily accessible to children throughout the day. Include it at all meals and snacks. Provide a water-filled pitcher or pre-poured cups of water in a centrally located area.

## Meal and Snack Guidelines, continued

### Encourage Healthy Habits

- Serve only whole grain breads and cereals. Serve whole grain pasta, rice and baked goods when possible.
- Serve only lean or low-fat meats and meat alternatives prepared without added fat. Serve processed or high-fat meats no more than once a week.
- Serve extra lean (less than 5% total fat) beef and pork. Ground beef should be at least 90% lean.
- Serve plain yogurt or yogurt that has 30 grams of sugar or less per 8-ounce serving, 15 grams or less per 4-ounce serving, etc.
- Serve “low-sodium” (140 mg sodium or less per serving) products whenever feasible for canned or packaged food.
- Use lower-sodium condiments and sauces.
- Serve fruits and vegetables as the primary snacks and milk or water as the primary beverages. Have bowls of fresh fruit or vegetables for children to snack on.
- Eliminate all food with little or no nutritional value, including chewing gum, candy and water ices.

### Encourage Breast Milk for Infants

- Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first six months of life. Breast milk or iron-fortified infant formula should be served for the first 12 months.
- Centers caring for infants should make every effort to support mothers who want to breastfeed, for example, by providing a quiet space for breastfeeding mothers.
- If you give formula or dry cereal to infants, only use iron-fortified versions.

## B. Food Served at Celebrations

- Have a written policy for special occasion meals and snacks.
- Limit special occasion meals and snacks to once a month.
- Serve sweets/desserts in moderation and in appropriate portions. For example, offer one small cookie per person.
- Offer healthy celebration food: seltzer or water mixed with fresh fruit or 100% fruit juice, vegetables with low-fat dip, fresh fruit, or low-fat cheese with whole-grain crackers.
- Celebrate special occasions with physical activity such as games, dancing and extra playground time.

## C. Mealtime Environment

- Turn off the television during meals.
- Broaden children’s experience with foods by providing variety while taking into account children’s cultural and other preferences/requirements.
- Involve children in food service: simple food preparation, setting the table, serving food and cleaning up. Closely supervise these activities to assure safe food handling.
- Do not use food as a punishment or a reward.
- Encourage children to eat, but do not force them.
- Experiential, hands-on nutrition education can reinforce healthy eating habits. Use nutrition education curricula in lesson plans. (See enclosed Resource List.)

## II. Physical Activity Guidelines for Child Care Centers

The following physical activity guidelines are *recommended* by the New York City Health Code, New York City Food Standards or USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). For Head Start Programs, some of the practices below are required and supported by the Head Start Performance Standards.

### A. Physical Activity in the Classroom

- Incorporate structured (guided) and unstructured (free play) physical activity into daily lesson plans.
- Implement a developmentally appropriate physical activity curriculum to enhance motor, cognitive, emotional and social development. (See enclosed Resource List.)
- Physical activity lessons should develop fine and gross motor skills.
- Include a variety of expressive, creative and culturally appropriate activities (including dances) in lesson plans to encourage children to use their imaginations.
- Avoid activities that eliminate children from play, such as sitting out after being "tagged".
- Groups should have 10 or fewer children per adult so younger children can receive individualized instruction. Encourage equal participation from boys and girls.
- Do not withhold or use physical activity as punishment.
- Send parents regular communications about activities and games they can play at home.
- The NYC Health Code limits passive, sedentary activities to 30 minutes at a time. Light physical activity, such as slow walking, table games and other activities providing some movement are not considered sedentary.

### B. Structured Physical Activity

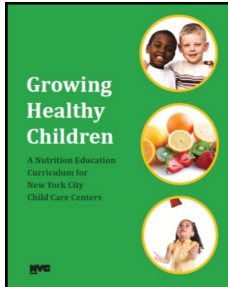
- Provide adult-led structured physical activity that is developmentally appropriate and engages all children.
- Participate in physical activity with children, model and demonstrate all movements, observe children's responses to movements and adapt the learning experience as needed.
- Encourage children to creatively explore a range of movements and their environments.
- Design activity so all children are active participants.
- Provide enough equipment for each child to participate in an activity.
- Physical activity equipment should have different colors, shapes, sizes, textures and weights.

### C. Screen Time

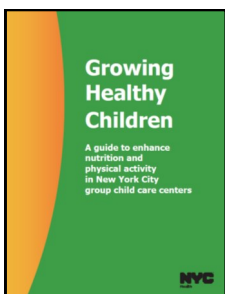
- Make sure all programming is commercial-free.
- Limit computer time, if offered, to 15-minute increments. Do not exceed 30 minutes per week.
- "Smart boards" are considered screen time if they are used as a computer to run screen-based media, but not if they are used to draw or write. As a reminder, all screen-based media is part of the 30 minutes of screen time allowed per week by the NYC Health Code.

# Resources

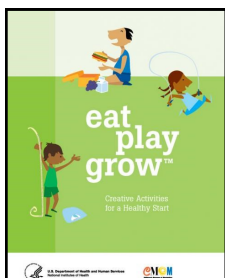
Use nutrition and physical education in lesson planning. Experiential, hands-on education can reinforce healthy eating and physical activity habits. Featured resources include:



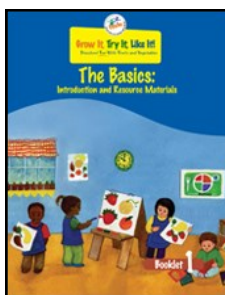
**Growing Healthy Children: A Nutrition Education Curriculum for New York City Child Care Centers** was developed for teachers of 3 and 4 year-olds. It is adapted with permission from the Eat Well Play Hard in Child Care Settings Curriculum developed by the New York State Department of Health’s Child and Adult Care Food Program.



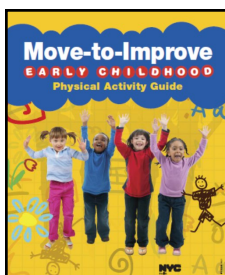
**Growing Healthy Children: A Guide to Improving Physical Activity and Nutrition in Group Child Care Centers** is an overview of City and federal regulations and standards. The guide includes examples of written policies and communication tools.



**EatPlayGrow™** was created by the Children’s Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) and approved by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NIH research and CMOM’s arts and literacy-based teaching combine to create a creative health education program. Each lesson contains health messages, an art activity, a healthy snack, group storytime, physical activity and a parent handout to reinforce the lesson at home.



**Grow It, Try It, Like It! Preschool Fun with Fruits and Vegetables** is a garden-themed nutrition education kit introducing children to fruits and vegetables. Lessons contain hands-on planting and nutrition activities. Family-sized recipes give tips for cooking with children.



The **Move-to-Improve Early Childhood Program** helps child care centers and preschools provide the 30 minutes of daily structured physical activity required by the NYC Health Code.