

child care and child nutrition

by Eric Karolak

Mealtimes in child care make a difference

The meals you serve in child care are an important part of a child's day. Children learn by example about healthy food choices. And you know well that the nutritious meals you serve are also a time of sharing, learning, and social development. "We consider mealtime to be an important part of life skills development," a pediatrician and Nebraska center owner explains. Her teachers "sit



Eric Karolak is Executive Director of the Early Care and Education Consortium, a public policy alliance of America's leading national, regional, and independent providers

of quality early learning programs. ECEC members operate more than 7,600 centers enrolling more than 800,000 children in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Dr. Karolak previously led the National Child Care Information Center, the largest federal clearinghouse focused on child care and early education for low-income families. He has worked closely with states developing the technical aspects of child care assistance programs, quality rating systems, and partnerships across early childhood programs. He has conducted policy research and fiscal analysis in the areas of child welfare, child care, women's labor force participation, and public housing, and has testified before several state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. Dr. Karolak also has served as an advisor to a national quality initiative, a non-profit child care center, a local government commission, and a metropolitan United Way.

down for family style meals with our students, expose them to a wide variety of healthy foods, and teach them to try new foods."

And the food itself is important for healthy development and learning! Hungry children are less able to focus; and researchers tell us that they're more likely than their non-hungry peers to experience more absences and exhibit generally poor behavior. Preschoolers and school-aged children who experience hunger have higher rates of internalizing problems, such as anxiety. Researchers tell us that children who go hungry in kindergarten are noticeably behind their peers in reading and math by third grade (Partnership for America's Economic Success, 2008).

With recent increases in food prices, growing emphasis on children's health issues, and the overall rise in 'food insecurity' among families and communities during this recession, the meals you serve in your program may be even more important to your families. "Child care is the first line of defense against hunger for too many families," says Geri Henchy, Director of Nutrition Policy and Early Childhood Nutrition at the Food Research and Action Center. "In some centers I've visited, the directors told me the children come in Monday morning and eat three

bowls of cereal because they've had so little to eat over the weekend."

The weak economy may also be challenging your child care program budget. Fluctuations in enrollment come up against rising costs making every penny count. So for many reasons a federal program that helps defray the costs of snacks and meals in child care programs is particularly important and timely.

Child Nutrition Act reauthorization and CACFP

The Child Nutrition Act is up for reauthorization in 2009. When Congress passes program legislation, it 'authorizes' the existence of a program or initiative. In some cases, a piece of legislation might need to be 'reauthorized' after a period of time. Reauthorization is an opportunity to review and improve the specific policies.

The Child Nutrition Act includes the school breakfast and lunch programs, WIC, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. During the Child Nutrition Act reauthorization process, policy experts, researchers, and program providers will speak to the benefits and needed improvements for each of these initiatives.

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Our primary interest in the legislation is the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which serves more than two million children in child care settings each day. The program provided 1.85 billion meals and snacks in 2007. Some 175,000 family child care providers participate in CACFP, and program participation by child care centers has more than doubled in the last 20 years — from 20,000 to over 40,000.

A key support for providers

CACFP provides reimbursement for food and meal preparation costs, ongoing training in the nutritional needs of children and food safety, and onsite assistance in meeting the program's nutritional requirements. It's "a key source of support" according to Henchy, especially now as family child care homes and child care centers feel the impact of the recession. "It's really gotten us through tough economic times," explains an Iowa family child

care provider who has been a part of the program for 25 years.

A pilot initiative that was made permanent in the 2004 reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act makes it possible for for-profit child care centers to participate in CACFP. For-profit child care centers can participate so long as at least 25% of their children are in low-income families. Since then, about half of the center-based growth in CACFP has been from for-profit centers.

Regardless of the tax status of a child care program, children who are hungry need to be served, and child care providers rely on the support of programs like CACFP to make it possible. "For-profit centers were excluded for years and years, so their growth has been more noticeable," according to Geri Henchy. "And there are a lot of eligible children in those centers."

"Our program serves a population where over 40 percent are in poverty,"

a Chicago center owner reports. "Since joining the food program, we have been able to improve the menu and the quantity served to all children. Full breakfast, full lunch, full snack . . . has

Who Can Participate?

- **Child care centers** — for-profit and not-for-profit, although the rules differ for each
- **Family child care providers** — if they or their children meet eligibility criteria
- **Head Start grantees** — all are categorically eligible

To learn more about specific requirements and to enroll in your state, visit your state's child nutrition program office — web sites and contact information are available from the USDA (see Resources).

brought in resources to reduce costs to our most needy families. BUT more resources are still needed.”

Taking it to Washington

Members of Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture are interested in children’s health. Advocates can easily tie meals and snacks to a child’s healthy development. And everyone is aware of these difficult economic times and strained budgets. The policy discussion is about much more than dollars, but without dollars the appropriate changes will be limited.

The increasing price of food doesn’t just impact a family budget. It is making a huge difference in the budgets of child care programs that serve many children every day — sometimes three meals a day.

At the same time need is increasing, access to CACFP is declining, and nutrition quality is threatened. Providers are struggling to participate, in part because reimbursement levels are not keeping up with meal pattern requirements and the increasing price of food, and the unreimbursed expense may be more than a center or family child care home can cover. And the paperwork can be significant. As child development experts, we know the value of a nutritious meal. But CACFP requirements mean that time and funds have to be diverted from other efforts.

As Congress reviews the Child Nutrition Act, we will have to work to let Members know there is a strong constituency that relies on CACFP.

CACFP policy recommendations

- Strengthen program access and support participation by underserved children and communities

- Enhance nutrition quality and provide adequate meal reimbursements
- Modernize technology and simplify program administration and operation
- Increase funding — \$20 billion over 5 years to really meet the needs of children and to make the necessary improvements to all programs under the Child Nutrition Act

For more details on policy recommendations, please visit the Food Research and Action Center and the Early Care and Education Consortium (see Resources).

What you can do

- Invite legislators to visit a CACFP-participating program during mealtime. We particularly want to show how CACFP benefits babies and toddlers, too, that mealtime is learning time, and that we can teach good habits that last a lifetime.
- Find out if your Members of Congress are on the Senate Agriculture Committee or the House Education and Labor Committee. While every Member of Congress is important and needs to hear about your role in child nutrition, the Members of these Committees will have the first access to the development of the Child Nutrition legislation. Look up your Members of Congress by entering your ZIP code here: http://action.ececonsortium.org/action_center.
- Set up a meeting with your Member of Congress — right in your district while they are working at home.
- Share stories! ECEC is collecting stories from providers across the

country about participation in CACFP, the importance of meals in child care, and what providers are hearing and seeing from families in this economy. To tell your story, go to www.ececonsortium.org. These stories will be compiled and shared with Congress and the Administration as we educate them about provider perspectives on CACFP.

Reference

Partnership for America’s Economic Success. (2008, November). Reading, writing and hungry: The consequences of food insecurity on children and our nation’s economic success. Viewed online at www.partnershipforsuccess.org/docs/researchproject_foodinsecurity_200811_brief.pdf.

Resources

Early Care and Education Consortium: The voice of America’s leading child care providers on Capitol Hill and in the states
www.ececonsortium.org/federal.php

Food Research and Action Center: A national organization working to improve public policies to eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the U.S.
www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/cnreauthor/cnrc.htm

My Pyramid for Preschoolers: The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s updated nutrition guide for young children
www.mypyramid.gov/preschoolers/index.html

U.S. Department of Agriculture Child Nutrition Program Directory
www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Contacts/StateDirectory.htm

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