

Child Care Provider's Guide

Helping kids eat right and stay
active in a child care setting

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Introduction to the Child Care Provider's Guide

As a childcare professional, you have the responsibility and the fun of working with children during a particularly important phase of their lives. Throughout the early years, kids are learning—and often pushing the limits—every day. You know that early patterns can grow into lifelong habits. What you teach children—whether directly, through play, or by your example—has lasting impact.

One particularly important area is nutrition and fitness. We all have seen the dramatic recent increase in overweight and out-of-shape kids—and even toddlers. The percentage of overweight kids (and those on track to become overweight) has doubled in the last two decades.

The long-term health consequences of this weight gain include: an increased incidence of type 2 diabetes (even in childhood), heart disease, arthritis, and some cancers. And being overweight has an emotional impact on children and teens by contributing to social isolation, as well as lowered self-esteem and depression.

But dealing with weight and fitness issues isn't easy for anyone. In this challenge, you have a special, important role to play.

This Child Care Provider's Guide can help you. Knowing that you are a key partner in preventing weight problems and establishing good patterns, we created this guide to help you understand and address important nutrition and fitness issues for the children in your care.

Each section in the guide offers a number of important bullet points about children's nutrition and fitness. You'll also find practical suggestions we call "action points." For instance, you might want to take a new look at the snacks you serve and assess whether you need to build more active time into the children's daily routine.

In addition, we included a "Did you know?" section to fill you in on research findings and the best principles to employ when caring for young children. At the close of this guide, you'll find important information about when young children learn different physical skills.

We hope this guide makes your work easier and more effective. With your help, we can put a lot of little ones on the road to being healthy and happy kids!



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Infants

In these first 12 months, caregivers can help babies grow up healthy. How? By seeing that they get proper nutrition and plenty of physical activity while they're in your care.

Feeding: newborn–6 months

Points for caregivers

- Breastfeeding is the best food for babies, so invite moms into the childcare facility to breastfeed, allow them to store pumped breast milk in the refrigerator, and be willing to bottle-feed babies using pumped breast milk.
- If the child is formula-fed, talk with the parents about typical feeding patterns. If you are responsible for preparing formula, do so as directed on the package. Formula should not be diluted, thickened, or made more concentrated unless specifically instructed by a physician.
- Wet and soiled diapers are a way of determining if a baby is healthy and eating enough. Keep an eye on this so you can inform the parents of any problems or changes.
- Even babies know when they're full. Be aware of messages the baby may be sending (such as turning the head away from the breast or bottle, stopping sucking, or sucking more slowly).
- Do not give a baby solid foods (even a little taste) unless the parents have asked you to do so.

Action point: Let the parents know about changes in the baby's eating pattern. Not eating could indicate illness. If the baby is especially hungry, he or she might be going through a "growth spurt." Remind parents to bring in extra breast milk or formula so there will always be enough on hand.

Did you know? Solid foods (cereal, fruits, vegetables, and meats) are not recommended for babies younger than 4 to 6 months of age. Before this time, a baby may not be ready to swallow solids and may naturally spit them right out. Also, starting foods too early may cause food allergies, which are on the rise.

Physical activity: newborn–6 months

Points for caregivers

- Babies build neck and shoulder strength through "tummy time." Supervision is a must during these brief sessions. Pick the child up if he or she gets upset or frustrated. Do not allow babies to sleep on their tummies, though.
- Limit time in swings, bouncer seats, and exercise saucers to no more than 30 minutes a day, split into at least two sessions.
- Spread out a blanket and play with the babies. Put toys in reach and give them room to wiggle, squirm, and stretch.

Action point: Create a safe play space for infants, ideally away from the older children. Close doors or install baby gates. Remove furniture from the space and pad sharp corners. Keep dangerous items out of reach, including cleaning agents, breakable objects, and electrical cords. Cover all electrical outlets and tie up or remove curtain cords.

Did you know? Choking is one of the leading causes of death among children younger than 1 year old. Babies, as you know, love to put things in their mouths, so be sure to patrol the play area for small toy parts, barrettes, and other tidbits babies manage to pick up. Supervision is the name of the game.

Feeding: 6–12 months

Points for caregivers

- Eating solid food is a skill that babies acquire over time. Go slowly and stop if the baby gets upset.
- Breast milk or formula should remain the main food in a baby's diet during these transitional months.
- Rice cereal is typically the first solid food a baby will try. It's the least likely to cause a food allergy.
- After cereals, babies usually start fruits or vegetables. Parents should introduce these at home one at a time and wait several days between new foods.
- Avoid giving babies sweets or desserts in the first year.
- Let the baby feed himself or herself as much as possible. When spoon-feeding, watch for signs of fullness (such as turning away or throwing food on the floor).
- Never force a baby to eat.
- Avoid offering foods that are choking hazards, such as pieces of hard fruits and raw vegetables, grapes, hot dogs, or any other food that can't be gummed.
- Use washable bibs and tarps under high chairs to minimize messes.
- Check with parents before offering cow's milk. Most children start making this switch around 12 months.

Action point: If babies are feeding themselves, stay within arm's reach. That way you can help quickly if one of them needs you and you'll also be nearby for mealtime conversation.

Did you know? Research shows it may take as many as 20 tries before a child accepts a new food. So even if the baby didn't like green beans the first time, it's OK to try again if the parents want you to. Who knows? One day, the baby just might eat them.

Physical activity: 6–12 months

Points for caregivers

- Give the babies you care for opportunities to practice new skills, such as rolling over and sitting up.
- Limit time in high chairs and exercise saucers to no more than 30 minutes a day, split into at least two sessions.
- Discourage screen time, including TV, videos, and DVDs. These activities are not recommended for children younger than 2 years old.
- Teach your babies time-tested rhymes and games such as "This Little Piggy," "Pop Goes the Weasel," "Pat-a-Cake," and "So Big!"
- Not all babies will crawl, but if you want to encourage a baby to crawl, place the child on his or her tummy and put a toy just out of reach.

Action point: Fill a floor-level cabinet with baby-safe items such as age-appropriate toys or plastic containers. Lock up the rest of the cabinets and move hazardous items out of baby's reach.

Did you know? Walkers with wheels don't help babies walk sooner. They also cause many injuries, usually by falls down the stairs. Tell parents about this danger and, if you have any in your center, encourage the director to remove them. Even if your center doesn't have stairs, rolling walkers are a problem because they give kids access to hazards that they couldn't otherwise reach.

Toddlers

Children between the ages of 1 and 3 years old work hard to gain their independence. All the tantrums and shouts of "No!" are evidence of that. As a caregiver, you can help kids become more independent—a little at a time—when it comes to eating and activity.

Nutrition: 12–24 months

Points for caregivers

- Doctors recommend babies start drinking cow's milk no earlier than 12 months of age. You might suggest parents offer cow's milk only in a cup and limit it to 16 to 24 ounces per day.
- During this time, toddlers are at risk of iron deficiency. Encourage parents to continue serving iron-fortified cereals and increase iron-rich foods (such as lean meats, poultry, fish, enriched grains, dried beans, and tofu).
- Toddlers can get some of the independence they crave by feeding themselves. Work with parents to provide appropriate finger foods.
- Allow toddlers to stop eating if they no longer seem hungry (turning away from a spoonful or throwing food). By not forcing a child to eat, you help teach him or her what full means.
- Schedule regular meal and snack times.
- Do not regularly offer candy, cookies, or other sweet treats, and don't use treats as bribes to get a child to eat.
- Ask parents about any food allergies and how to respond if a reaction occurs.

Action point: Introduce kid-friendly utensils, even though the child may still use his or her fingers at this age.

Did you know? Cleaning the plate may contribute to overeating and overweight. When told to clean the plate, a child is encouraged to override any feelings of fullness. Nutrition experts often endorse this philosophy instead: Offer healthy foods and let the child decide what to eat or whether to eat at all. By doing this, the child will learn to eat healthier foods. At the same time, the child feels in control and is learning to self-regulate eating.

Physical activity: 12–24 months

Points for caregivers

- Know that children acquire skills at their own pace. For instance, not all kids walk at 12 months. Some walk earlier and others walk later.
- Provide plenty of supervised physical activity each day, such as practicing walking or climbing. Toddlers should get 30 minutes or more of structured physical activity every day.
- Also provide plenty of supervised free play, when children can safely explore and play with toys. Kids need one hour or more of this kind of activity every day.
- Know which skills your kids are working on and help them achieve these milestones. After learning to walk, a child will learn to pull toys while walking, carry toys while walking, kick a ball, use the stairs, and walk backward.
- Don't allow a toddler to be inactive for more than one hour unless the child is sleeping.
- Avoid screen time, including TV, videos, DVDs, and computer time. These activities aren't recommended for kids younger than 2.

Action point: Examine the use of videos and DVDs at your center. Children learn best from interaction with others and the chance to experience the three-dimensional world. Kids younger than 2 shouldn't watch TV, videos, or DVDs, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Did you know? One out of five kids between ages 2 and 5 are already overweight or obese. You can help fight this trend by encouraging children to be active while in your care.

Nutrition: 24-36 months

Points for caregivers

- Encourage parents to provide a variety of foods for their child, even if the child seems stuck on one thing, such as macaroni and cheese.
- Schedule regular meal and snack times.
- Make snack and lunch times pleasant and fun for kids.
- Serve healthy snacks to the group. In this way, kids can be role models for each other when it comes to eating nutritious food.
- Accept that kids of this age are messy eaters, but feel free to take away food if a child has stopped eating and is just throwing it around.
- Do not bargain with a child to eat a certain number of bites or offer dessert as a reward.
- Do not regularly offer candy, cookies, or other sweet treats.
- Ask parents about any food allergies and how to respond if a reaction occurs.

Action point: Perform a snack makeover! Take a look at the snacks served to children at your facility. Limit sugary cereals, cookies, doughnuts, and salty snacks, such as cheese puffs. Instead, offer low-sugar cereals, whole-grain crackers, and fruit cut into small pieces. If parents provide snacks, talk to them about the center's goal that kids will eat nutritiously at snack time. If the center buys the snacks, talk with the director about how to revise the snack menu.

Did you know? Toddlers need to eat often, as much as six times a day, including three meals and three snacks. Some kids may get hungry near the end of the day, but you might be worried about spoiling their dinners. The solution is to talk with parents if you think a late-day snack is a good idea.

Physical activity: 24-36 months

Points for caregivers

- After learning to walk well, children in this age group will learn to balance on one foot, climb well, throw a ball overhand, run and jump well, kick a ball forward, and pedal a tricycle. Help them master these skills.
- As children become more mobile, close supervision is more important than ever. Track your toddlers—indoors and out—so you can prevent injuries before they happen.
- Find ways that you can be active with the children. One way to do this: Turn on the music and dance together!
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than one to two hours of screen time a day for children over 2 years old. Help parents meet this goal by limiting TV, videos, DVDs, and computer use while children are in your care.
- Watch out for older toddlers on the playground. Make sure the equipment isn't too big for them and supervise closely in case kids need assistance.

Action point: Take it outside! Toddlers like to move and be active. Make the most of this with your kids by taking them outdoors on most days if possible. Let parents know about this policy and encourage them to send appropriate clothes for outdoor excursions.

Did you know? The average 3-year-old is active only 20 minutes a day, according to a 2004 study of Scottish children. Why are toddlers far less active than they were 25 years ago? The study cited TV, videos, and long car rides.

Preschoolers

The preschool years are a time of transition, when children become increasingly self-reliant. By serving nutritious foods and encouraging physical activity, caregivers and parents can help prepare preschoolers for the exciting times ahead.

Meals and snacks

Points for caregivers

- Create a structure for lunch and snacks, so kids know what to expect. Typically, preschoolers eat three meals and two or three snacks.
- Take a look at the snack menu, if the center provides them. Limit sugary cereals, cookies, doughnuts, and salty snacks, such as cheese puffs. Instead, offer low-sugar cereals, whole-grain crackers, cheese, yogurt, and fruit cut into small pieces. Even picky eaters may be inclined to try a healthy snack when they see friends eating it.
- Let kids eat as much of their lunch or snacks as they desire. Don't force a child to "clean the plate."
- Open the lines of communication with parents about healthy lunches. Encourage them to avoid foods that aren't as nutritious, such as hot dogs or prepackaged lunches that come with a sugary drink and candy bar.
- Talk with parents about eating issues you notice (for example, when a child doesn't eat what the parent packs for lunch or when a child seems particularly hungry).
- Ask parents about any food allergies and how to respond if a reaction occurs.

Action point: Talk about cooking with kids and prepare easy recipes together. Something like Friendship Fruit Salad, where each child brings a fruit, can be a great lesson in preparing and enjoying healthy foods.

Did you know? If kids don't have a structure for meals and snacks, they might eat small portions all day long. This is called "grazing." Kids who graze are at risk for excessive weight gain.

Hunger

Points for caregivers

- Understand that preschoolers may say they're hungry when they really mean they're bored, sad, or in need of some attention.
- If you suspect a child isn't really hungry, inquire a little when the child asks for food. Ask, "Would you like to play with your friends?" and help get the child involved in classroom activities.
- Be flexible if the child seems truly hungry. He or she could be in a growth spurt or perhaps he or she didn't get enough breakfast.
- Talk with children about feelings of hunger and fullness. Let them know it's OK to stop eating when full. If you eat with the kids, talk about your own feelings of fullness. Tell them, "I'm full, so I'm not going to eat anymore."

Action point: Parents will want to send in birthday treats, so you might want to recommend a few good ones. Suggest blueberry muffins instead of cupcakes or doughnuts. Something like bagels and fruit also can be healthy choices. The occasional cupcake is fine, of course. But it's better if they're not served too often.

Did you know? Children are born with the ability to know when they're full, but they can lose it over time. A University of Denver study found that heavier kids tended to overeat but that all kids could learn to recognize their own sense of fullness.

Drinks

Points for caregivers

- Serve low-fat milk and water most often, if your center provides them.
- Avoid serving soda, juice cocktails, chocolate milk, and other sugary drinks.

Action point: If you serve juice, provide only 100% juice and limit it to 1 serving (4 to 6 ounces) per day.

Did you know? One study found that one in eight preschoolers drank nine ounces or more of soda every day. That's about 100 empty calories. As they get older, kids are likely to drink even more soda, which has been linked to overweight and other problems, including tooth decay.

Activity

Points for caregivers

- Preschoolers should get 60 minutes of structured (adult-led) play time each day. This can be broken up into several sessions spaced throughout the day.
- Give kids plenty of time for active free play. Preschoolers should get at least 60 minutes each day.
- When the kids are active, be sure to play along. Let them see that you enjoy being active, too.
- Help the children work on new motor skills, such as hopping, broad jumping, catching a ball, or doing a somersault.

Action point: Inspect the outdoor play area at your center. It should have a soft surface for landing (sand, deep wood chips, or rubber mats). Also enforce rules about holding on when swinging and going feet first, not head first, on the slide. Don't let preschoolers climb higher than five feet. Supervision, of course, is the best safety tip of all.

Did you know? Many parents are eager to enroll preschoolers in organized sports, but kids aren't really ready for complicated rules and the coordination that goes along with them. Instead of playing baseball or soccer with preschoolers, work on the skills involved in both games. Practice tossing the ball, kicking the ball, and hitting the ball with a fat plastic bat.

Screen time

Points for caregivers

- Limit the use of TV, videos, DVDs, and computer games. Preschool children should watch no more than one to two hours per day.
- If kids occasionally watch TV, videos, or DVDs, choose quality movie and programming. Consider a child-oriented video or DVD.

Action point: Help educate parents about limiting TV and computer usage at home. Use bulletin boards or newsletters to spread the message and suggest more active pastimes for preschoolers.

Did you know? Research shows that watching TV is associated with being overweight, yet 36% of kids under age 6 have TVs in their bedrooms. On top of that, two out of three young children live in homes where the TV is on most of the time, even if no one is watching, according to Kaiser Family Foundation research.

Developmental Chart

Age	What can they do?	Age	What can they do?
0–3 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> focus and follow objects, especially faces and brightly colored or shiny toys spontaneously wave arms and kick legs raise head while on tummy swipe for dangling objects hold rattle placed in hand smile and coo 	9–12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> get on hands and knees crawl, scoot, or creep pull to stand cruise along furniture stand alone may take first steps say “mama” and “dada”
3–6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> on tummy, prop self up and lift head roll over reach for and grasp objects hold head steady while sitting sit with support laugh 	12–24 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> walk independently pull toys while walking carry toys while walking stoop and get back up begin to run kick a ball hold railing up and down stairs walk backward
6–9 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sit without support sit and pivot stand with support start to use finger and forefinger to grasp objects wave bye-bye babble 	24–36 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> balance one to two seconds on one foot climb well throw ball overhand bend over easily without falling run and jump well kick ball forward alternate feet up and down stairs pedal tricycle