



Nutrition for Family Living

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May, 2008 Topics

Most Child Care Centers Could Do More to Improve Children's Diets
Data sources on food, nutrition and health education needs

Most Child Care Centers Could Do More to Improve Children's Diets

By Susan Nitzke

The type and amount of food served to, and consumed by, 117 children in 20 child care centers were observed by a team of researchers in North Carolina. The purpose was to determine whether the children's food intakes at the centers met recommendations of 1/2 to 2/3 of the MyPyramid daily food group servings for children in this 2-5 age group. Almost all the children (>95%) ate or drank something from each food group on a daily basis. The most favorable intakes were from the milk group (70% of the MyPyramid recommendation of 2 cups). However, half of the milk that the children consumed was whole milk rather than non-fat or low-fat. For the rest of the food groups and subgroups, most children consumed much less than the recommended amounts. For example, children consumed less than 13% of MyPyramid recommendations for whole grains and only 7% of the MyPyramid recommendation for dark green and orange vegetables.

This study showed that in general, the quality of food served to children in these day care facilities was in need of improvement. Children were not consuming recommended amounts of whole grains, fruits (excluding 100% fruit juice), or vegetables while attending full-time child care, and were consuming excess amounts of solid fats and added sugars. The authors recommend substituting whole fruit or vegetables for fruit juice and substituting whole-grain items such as crackers for sweet snacks like cookies.

Implications for Extension Educators. By modeling healthy food choices and making nutrient-dense foods available to children at meals and snacks, children can be encouraged to develop healthy habits right from the start. These concepts should be emphasized in meals and snacks at child care programs and in nutrition education programs for parents, grandparents, and child-care staff.

Reference: Ball SC, Benjamin SE, Ward DS. Dietary intakes in North Carolina child-care centers: Are children meeting current recommendations? *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2008;108:718-721.

Note: The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) provides guidance and support to participating day care providers and administers the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). CACFP promotes healthy and nutritious meals for children and adults in day care by reimbursing participating day care operators for their meal costs. CACFP operates in regulated child care centers, outside-school-hours care centers, family day care homes, and some adult day care centers. Fact sheets, posters, and other resources are available from DPI. See <http://dpi.state.wi.us/fns/cacfp1.html>.



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Other resources: The Raising Healthy Eaters curriculum emphasizes development of healthy eating habits and preferences for parents and caregivers of young children. A new teaching resource called Grow it, try it, like it will soon be available from USDA's Team Nutrition resources in addition to the current education and food preparation guides such as *Nibbles for Health*, *Building Blocks for Fun and Health Meals*, *Making Nutrition Count for Children*, and *Menu Magic for Children*. (see <http://teammnutrition.usda.gov/childcare.html> and note that some of the Team Nutrition resources are being revised to reflect language in MyPyramid rather than the older Food Guide Pyramid.)



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If you are part of a coalition or project that is developing proposals or needs-based plans for educational programs on food, nutrition and health, the WNEP database contains research summaries that may be helpful in locating relevant local, state and national data on food security, dietary quality, food resource management, and food safety. See <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/overview/research.cfm>.