

# Nutrition and Physical Activity Best Practices in Childcare Settings: Family Child Care Homes and Childcare Centers

Research Brief – July 2025

## Background

Early childhood is an important time to establish a foundation for long-term health. In the United States, about 60% of children aged 3-5 years spend time in childcare.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, health-promoting childcare environments are especially important to ensure that every child has an opportunity to thrive.

CalFresh Healthy Living (CFHL), known nationally as SNAP-Ed, implements nutrition and physical activity interventions in childcare settings within low-income communities. These include both family childcare homes and childcare centers, which differ in size, structure, and cost. When public health practitioners and policy makers understand differences in practices between these two settings, they can be best equipped to provide tailored support, such as through CFHL interventions, to promote child health equity.



## What We Evaluated

We conducted a cross-sectional study of California childcare providers participating in CFHL interventions. Each childcare provider completed a survey ([Site Level Assessment Questionnaire](#) or SLAQ, developed by NPI researchers) about practices that promote healthy eating and physical activity for children in their care. Survey data were used to assess the extent to which best practices were implemented in three key areas: dietary behavior, physical activity, and parent engagement and wellness policy.

### *Index Measures:*

Eight index measures were constructed to reflect evidence-based best practices.



#### **Dietary behavior**

- Nutrition education
- Quality of food and beverages offered
- Staff training in child nutrition



#### **Physical activity (PA)**

- Quantity of PA opportunities
- Quality of PA opportunities
- Environmental support for PA



#### **Parent engagement & wellness policy**

- Comprehensive, active parent engagement
- Support for wellness policy implementation, monitoring, and feedback

## What We Found

Childcare providers reported highest adherence to best practices in quantity of physical activity offered, quality of food and beverage offered, and environmental support for physical activity. They reported lowest adoption of best practices for wellness policy implementation, monitoring, and feedback; staff training in nutrition; and implementation of nutrition education. When comparing family childcare homes and centers, we observed the following differences:



### Family childcare homes more often reported:

- Preparing meals from scratch
- Serving fruits and vegetables
- Nutrition training opportunities for staff
- Offering staff-led, physical activity opportunities



### Childcare centers more often reported:

- Robust nutrition education through participatory, hands-on activities (e.g., taste tests, gardening, etc.)
- Fixed and portable play equipment
- Not withholding active play time as punishment
- Not having children seated > 30 minutes at a time
- Opportunities for parent involvement
- Providing guidance on food and beverages for special occasions
- An active wellness committee

## Implications for Early Childcare Programs

- Childcare providers may need additional resources to create optimal nutrition and physical activity environments
  - Additional research can help identify the most effective resources for improving nutrition and physical activity environments in childcare
- Tailoring nutrition and physical activity interventions to the different resources and capacities of family childcare homes and centers may improve child health equity
- Public health programs and practitioners can support childcare providers by:
  - assisting with annual SLAQ assessments and action planning to make continuous improvements
  - providing staff training in areas of need, sharing model wellness policies, and identifying and applying for grants that assist in purchasing equipment

## For More Information

- ✓ Read the full [peer-reviewed research article](#)
- ✓ Learn more about our [CFHL evaluation research](#)
- ✓ Contact us at [EvaluateSNAPed@ucanr.edu](mailto:EvaluateSNAPed@ucanr.edu)

<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. COE – School enrollment rates of young children [Internet]. Available from: <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cfa/enrollment-of-young-children> [Last accessed: July 17, 2025].

Suggested citation: Vasicsek R, Rider CD, Cortez S, Brown MW, Research Brief: Nutrition and Physical Activity Best Practices in Childcare Settings: Family Child Care Homes and Childcare Centers. Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. July 2025.