

# Healthy Eating and Physical Activity in Early Care and Education Settings:

## A Success Story from a Rural Family Child Care Provider in Fayetteville, Ohio

### Background

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The Health Resources and Services Administration's Maternal and Child Health Bureau's mission is to improve the health and well-being of mothers, children, and their families in the U.S. One of its key levers is the State Title V MCH Block Grant program, a federal-state partnership that supports public health services and systems for addressing state-specific needs of MCH populations. Incorporation of MCH nutrition in state Title V programs and processes can contribute to a comprehensive and coordinated approach for improving the health of America's mothers, children, and families. This brief highlights promising practices and resources that MCH nutrition professionals can use to promote nutrition and physical activity in early care and education (ECE) settings.

Among the [2020 Title V State Action Plans](#), over 20 states describe improving the nutrition or physical activity environments in ECE settings. ECE settings, such as child care centers, family child care sites (FCC), pre-kindergarten classrooms, and Early Head Start and Head Start programs are influential nutrition and physical activity environments



for young children as the majority of children in the U.S. receive care in an ECE setting during the work week. ECE providers have a unique opportunity to support healthy eating and physical activity habits in children at a young age. State and local MCH public health nutritionists can support improved early childhood health and development in rural or urban regions through targeted trainings and technical assistance to ECE providers.

### Adapting and Implementing Promising Practices in ECE Settings

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This success story highlights Theresa Claypool, a FCC owner and provider in rural Fayetteville, Ohio (population 315). The improvements and interventions Theresa has applied in her ECE setting provide ideas for ways that MCH public health nutritionists can support ECE providers in adapting and implementing promising practices to improve children's health in ECE settings.

*States and agencies have different terminology for child care settings. For the purposes of this success story, “ECE settings” is used as a broad term describing any type of educational or care program that primarily serves infants and young children until they enter kindergarten. The term “FCC” is used as a specific ECE category where an educational or care program is home-based.*

Theresa’s interest in improving her FCC environment began after reading about the increasing rates of childhood obesity and the potential for diets to support better health. Theresa researched how to improve her menus but wanted additional resources. Her local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency recommended state-offered trainings that help providers create healthy ECE environments by implementing healthy policies, increasing physical activity, improving menus, and engaging families. Theresa obtained other free resources from national, state, and local programs to

help add more physical activity to the schedule, continue to improve menus, teach children about growing food, and budget healthier meals without increasing costs. Theresa shared, “I always avoided fried and sugary foods in [the] child care program, but the Child and Adult Care Food Program [CACFP] and the Ohio Healthy Programs [OHP] made me really go further. I changed my approach.” Theresa continues to research best practices for children’s health and wellness and makes an effort to take every affordable health training that fits her schedule.

### **Examples of changes Theresa has made to her meal planning strategy include:**

- Increasing the number of non-fried vegetables, fruit, and whole grains offered
- Decreasing the amount of juice and processed meats offered
- Using menus provided by OHP and her CACFP sponsor, which has provided her with healthy ideas adapted to the locality and season
- Implementing a four-week rotating menu, which has resulted in overall less planning time and allowed for reduced costs through bulk purchasing and streamlining waste
- Ordering groceries online, which has cut down on impulse purchases to further decrease costs
- Involving the children in food preparation

### **Other changes Theresa has made in her ECE setting include:**

- Adding elements of the Family Style Dining meal approach
- Using the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) free Team Nutrition resources to
  - ◇ Teach the kids about nutrition
  - ◇ Incorporate an additional 30 minutes of physical activity prior to lunch
- Eliminating screen time

## **Impact Seen**

Theresa recalls that when she started making menu changes, “the children did not know an orange from an apple.” Now the children connect different foods with ways in which the foods make them stronger and healthier. They are also more likely to eat foods at home after being served a new food multiple times at the center. Theresa noticed

that, in addition to the healthy menu changes, having more physical activity multiple times a day dramatically improved the children’s lunch behavior and the flow of the day. “I made physical activity part of the curriculum. We go hiking even. This has given us a better schedule, and I can also do physical assessments without kids knowing. Kids have adapted to all the changes. They try all the foods. They love all the [physical] activity, and they don’t ask for screens anymore. It is great knowing those children went home well fed and had fresh air. I know I have done the best for these children for that day—food-wise, physical activity-wise, curriculum-wise, and self-esteem-wise.”



Reflecting on the entire implementation process, Theresa noted, “Adding [recommendations from CACFP and other resources] is a lot of work at the beginning. It will take a couple of evenings to research and set up the four-week rotating menu. Then, once you have that done, it’s cake. When CACFP [required] whole grains one time each day, we laughed because we only use whole grains. Don’t be afraid of food waste or budget increases. Because of menu planning and online grocery shopping, my budget is only \$125 per week [for 7-12 children]. These healthy changes have not gone over budget. Be creative about spices and dipping. Kids don’t know what foods go together. We don’t have a lot of waste. The kids are open, and it is a lot easier than it looks...From a business perspective, in a rural setting, there is no better advertising. Parents know and appreciate the fact that you are willing to go the extra mile for their child’s wellbeing.”

## Next Steps and Additional Resources

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MCH public health nutritionists, including Title V staff, can use the resources indicated in Theresa’s success story, provided below, to partner with state ECE and child care health consultants in improving the nutrition and physical activity environments in ECE settings.

- [Child and Adult Care Food Program](#)
- [Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies](#)
- [Family Style Dining](#)
- [Grow it, Try It, Like It](#)
- [Ohio Healthy Programs](#)
- [USDA’s Team Nutrition](#)

Contact the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists at [asphn@asphn.org](mailto:asphn@asphn.org) for questions about this success story.  
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