

Overview

The Connecticut State Department of Education received a Team Nutrition grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). To support the development of a sustainable statewide initiative that encourages caregivers and food service staff in early childhood programs as well as parents to serve as role models for children to practice healthy eating and be physically active. A key component of the grant project was the development of a policy action guide. This guide was intended to facilitate the creation of a healthy environment in early childhood programs. Included in the guide are the Connecticut Child Care Nutrition Standards, which are a set of recommendations for all meals and snacks served in child care settings, with a focus on centers participating in CACFP. Workshops were held to assist centers and family day care home sponsors in implementing the recommendations in the guide.



The Yale University Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity received a parallel grant, "Understanding Preschool Food Policies: Predictors and Consequences," which is being integrated with all activities of the Connecticut State Department of Education's Team Nutrition grant project. Together, these two grants will provide in-depth information on creating child care environments that promote healthy eating and physical activity, which will serve as a guide for future efforts.

Groups Involved

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) was in charge of implementing the Team Nutrition grant project.

The review committee that worked on the Action Guide for Child Care Nutrition and Physical Activity Policies consisted of 50 members from several divisions and programs within CSDE as well as representatives from 45 additional agencies and organizations, including:

- State government
 - Connecticut State Department of Public Health
 - Connecticut State Department of Social Services
- Universities
 - Eastern Connecticut State University
 - University of Connecticut
 - Yale University Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity
- Non-profit and community organizations
 - Connecticut Parent Teacher Association
 - 211 Child Care/United Way of Connecticut
 - Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative
 - End Hunger Connecticut!
 - Connecticut Action for Healthy Kids
- Professional organizations
 - Connecticut Dietetic Association
 - Association of School Nurses of Connecticut
 - American Academy of Pediatrics

The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University coordinated its own grant project, funded through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, with the CSDE Team Nutrition grant project.

Both grant projects will be integrated into all appropriate activities of Connecticut's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and School Readiness Program.*

Implementation of the Project

The project had three stages:

1. An assessment of current nutrition- and physical activity-related policies and practices in early childhood programs.
2. The development of a policy action guide that:
 - Provides a framework for creating a healthy child care/preschool environment,
 - Offers comprehensive guidance on modeling healthy eating and physical activity, and
 - Helps early childhood programs to engage families as role models for healthy behaviors.
3. Training on how to implement the policy action guide and the empowerment of leaders who will teach caregivers, food service staff and parents how to use the guide.

Action Guide for Child Care Nutrition and Physical Activity Policies

The action guide was written to help child care providers who participate in CACFP to develop comprehensive nutrition- and physical activity-related policies. The guide can also be used by sponsoring organizations, other community organizations and agencies, and child care providers not participating in CACFP. The guide includes best practices for promoting healthy lifestyles that are based on current research and recommendations from relevant national authorities.

In addition to an introductory section on how to create a policy, the guide includes recommendations, the rationale, and implementation tips for specific policies in the following areas:

- Nutrition standards for foods served,
- Eating environment,
- Nutrition education,
- Physical activity, and
- Health promotion and communication.

Child Care Nutrition Standards

The CSDE Child Care Nutrition Standards are included as an appendix to the action guide. The standards represent recommendations that all child care providers are strongly encouraged to follow. The recommendations are intended to apply to all meals and snacks served, not just CACFP reimbursable meals. As with the rest of the guide, each nutrition standard is accompanied by extensive rationale, background information and tips.

The standards are divided into two categories: recommendations for children ages 1-12 years, and recommendations for infants ages birth through 11 months.

Under the category of children ages one to 12 years, recommendations are further broken down into subcategories that correspond to the components of the CACFP meal patterns, which are:

* The School Readiness Program provides children with open access to quality programs that promote their health and safety and prepare them for formal schooling.

- Grains and breads,
- Vegetables and fruits,
- Meat and meat alternates, and
- Milk.

Under the category of infants ages birth through 11 months, the subcategories correspond to components of the infant meal pattern, which are:

- Iron-fortified infant cereal, bread, and crackers,
- Vegetables and fruit
- Meat, fish, poultry, egg yolk and cooked dry beans or peas, and
- Breast milk, iron-fortified formula and fruit juice.

Workshops

Six regional workshops were held across Connecticut to promote the action guide and facilitate implementation of the recommendations. The Child Care Nutrition Standards were also explained during these workshops. Since the project was undertaken to improve nutrition- and physical activity-related policies and practices in CACFP, the workshops were aimed at centers participating in CACFP, including Head Start centers, as well as sponsoring organizations. However, some school readiness programs that do not participate in CACFP also attended.

Funding

CSDE received a USDA Team Nutrition grant to implement this project. The Yale University Rudd Center received a parallel grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, "Understanding Preschool Food Policies: Predictors and Consequences," which is being integrated with all activities of the Team Nutrition grant.

Future Plans

CSDE staff will continue giving workshops and promoting the action guide to other relevant groups, such as the state child care licensing agency, state child care organization, and additional providers who participate in CACFP but were not able to attend prior workshops. The CSDE website will also be updated to include all of the resources associated with the guide so that the information will be available to anyone interested.

Resources

The full policy action guide, Action Guide for Child Care Nutrition and Physical Activity Policies, is available at: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2678&Q=322562>. The Child Care Nutrition Standards are in Appendix C. Connecticut's six-part guide, Nutrition Policies and Guidance for the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which was re-released in June 2010, is available at: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2626&q=322326>.