



Assuring Optimal Nutrition and Physical Activity in Early Childhood

ISSUE BRIEF 7

This issue brief is the seventh in a series developed by Early Childhood Iowa (ECI) Quality Services and Programs Component group. This issue brief is intended to help inform policy makers of the importance of optimal nutrition and physical activity for all areas of child development; outline current programs, policies and practices; and suggest opportunities for improvement.

Daily physical activity and feeding practices that promote a healthy lifestyle are essential for achieving the vision of Early Childhood Iowa, “Every child, beginning at birth will be healthy and successful.”

- Adequate physical activity and nutrition are essential for optimal physical, social and cognitive development.
- Young children establish life-long eating and exercise habits that influence the prevalence of chronic diseases and obesity.
- Overweight children have more school absences, may have limitations in physical activity, and may experience negative reactions from peers.
- Children with developmental delays are at increased nutrition risk due to conditions that may affect their ability to ingest food safely, develop normal hunger/satiety cues, feed themselves or consume age-appropriate food textures.

Parents and child care providers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide healthy food choices and age-appropriate physical activities for children. They need to set positive examples for their children by modeling healthy eating and physical activity habits.

Current programs in Iowa that promote optimal nutrition and physical activity in families with young children and limited incomes:

- The Iowa Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) in the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals for health care prior to birth and to the age of 5.
- The Maternal and Child Health programs in IDPH refer families to education and health resources to assist them in establishing healthy feeding and physical activity practices.
- The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) through ISU Extension provides in-home and small group nutrition education for families.
- The Iowa Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program, administered through ISU Extension and IDPH, funds community-based nutrition and physical activity education for families.

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Current practices and policies in Iowa that promote optimal nutrition and physical activity in families with young children of all incomes:

- The Iowa Lactation Task Force facilitated by IDPH promotes breastfeeding. Children who are not breastfed are at greater risk for respiratory infections, ear infections, diarrhea, undernutrition, delayed cognitive development and child overweight than children who are breastfed.
- The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), administered by the Iowa Department of Education (IDOE), is a voluntary program that reimburses *participating* child care providers, Head Start Centers and other preschools for healthy meals and snacks. CACFP provides nutrition training and educational resources to the *participating* organizations.
- Early Learning Standards developed by the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) and IDOE with support from Iowa Child Care and Early Education Network, Iowa Head Start Association and Iowa State University include appropriate feeding and physical activity benchmarks and care giving supports.
- Nutrition and Mealtime competencies are included in the Iowa Early Care & Education Professional Development Core Body of Knowledge for Best Practices.

Opportunities for improving policies and practices that affect families with young children of all income levels:

- Require nutrition and physical activity training for personnel in child care centers and homes, pre-schools, and home visitation programs.
- Support funding for Child Care Nurse Consultants who promote policies that support healthy food choices, appropriate feeding and physical activity practices for children in child care and education settings that do not qualify for, or choose to participate in CACFP.
- Fund nutrition counseling for children with special health care needs through Child Health Specialty Clinics and/or Area Education Agencies. Nutrition services are listed as one of the mandated services in Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, but currently there are no systematic comprehensive nutrition services in Iowa's Early ACCESS Program.