



# Positive Eating Environment Self-Assessment for ECE Programs



NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Early Childhood Health and Wellness

*School Readiness Begins With Health*

Positive Eating Environment Self-Assessment for Early Care and Education (ECE) Programs is a brief, user-friendly assessment of basic mealtime practices. It is designed to help ECE programs (both center-based and family child care) serving 3 to 5 year olds evaluate the availability of healthy nutrition and mealtime environments. It is a tool that can also be used for staff discussions and policy planning. ECE trainers or technical assistance providers (e.g., child care referral and resource agency, nutrition consultant) could also use this assessment when working with ECE programs to enhance eating environments.

The Positive Eating Environment Self-Assessment for ECE Programs is different than other self-assessments that focus on similar topics. Its focus on baseline practices, without going into detailed best practices, will allow ECE programs to take important steps toward creating positive mealtime environments. For in depth, formal self-assessments of best practices that are tied to action planning, ECE programs may consider the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) and Let's Move! Child Care.<sup>1</sup>

**Before Self-Assessment:** To prepare for completing this assessment, gather your program's policies, procedures, and menus. It will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete the assessment. Additional time is required if you would like to assess multiple classroom environments. If you provide ECE services in your home, it is recommended you focus on the space where you serve children their meals and snacks.

Enhancing eating environments is an important way to help children develop healthy habits that will last a lifetime. Your efforts may lead to improved nutrition, healthy mealtime routines, and increased awareness among children about nutritious foods. You and your ECE program may find putting policies and practices into place help guide and reinforce your commitment to creating positive mealtime environments. Make a plan to share your efforts and successes with staff and families in your program.



**After Self-Assessment:** Once you complete this assessment, share results and observations with ECE staff in your program. Be sure to celebrate what you are doing well and develop an action plan for making changes (see Action Plan section below). It is recommended that you do a follow-up self-assessment quarterly to monitor progress. ***Remember, change takes time and small changes can make a big difference in creating a positive eating environment!***

**Instructions:** Read the statements under each section and select the level of frequency of the activity or behavior by checking the appropriate box. You will have three options for frequency (frequently, sometimes, or never), as well as a box indicating you are ready to get started working on the activity. Checking the “ready to get started” box may help you determine focus areas when your self-assessment is complete. The notes/reflections section is for you to write down any questions, ideas, or thoughts. The Action Plan section will help you to develop steps to achieve your goals, and the Resources section provides you with links to additional information or supports related to the tool's topics.

<sup>1</sup> The NAP SACC assessment is available for free download at <https://gonapsacc.org/resources/nap-sacc-materials>. The LMCC online assessment is accessible for free via the LMCC website at <https://healthykidshealthyfuture.org/join-us/>.



Section 1: Fruits				Date of Assessment			
<b>Fruit is available daily</b>							
	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
<b>Fruit options include fresh, frozen, and/or canned fruit packed in water or 100% juice (not packed in light or heavy syrup)</b>							
	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
<b>Fruit options are accessible to children for self-serving</b>							
	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
<b>All fruit names are introduced to the children prior to the meal or snack</b>							
	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
<b>Fruit names are written and/or pictured near where children eat</b>							
	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
<b>Adults caring for children (e.g, teachers, assistants, etc.) role model to children how to serve themselves and participate in family style dining</b>							
	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started

**Notes/Reflection**



<b>Section 2: Vegetables</b>	<b>Date of Assessment</b>
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**Vegetables are available daily**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Vegetable options include fresh, frozen, and/or canned vegetables labeled as “reduced sodium” or “no-salt-added”**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Vegetable options are accessible to children for self-serving**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**All vegetable names are introduced to the children prior to the meal or snack**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Vegetable names are written and/or pictured near where children eat**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Adults caring for children (e.g., teachers, assistants, etc.) role model to children how to serve themselves and participate in family style dining**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Notes/Reflection**



<b>Section 3: Beverages</b>	<b>Date of Assessment</b>
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**Fat-free or 1% milk is provided for children**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Milk is accessible to children for self-serving**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Drinking water is accessible to children for self-serving**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**If juice is served, it is 100% fruit or vegetable juice**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**All beverage names are introduced to the children prior to the meal or snack**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Beverage names are written and/or pictured near where children eat**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Notes/Reflection**



<b>Section 4: Menu Selection</b>			<b>Date of Assessment</b>				
<b>Menu boards featuring daily meals and snacks are available and visible near where children eat (e.g., classroom or dining space)</b>							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frequently	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ready to get started
<b>The menu includes a variety of foods which consider cultural and ethnic preferences</b>							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frequently	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ready to get started
<b>The menu is modified for children with food allergies/intolerances and children with disabilities</b>							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frequently	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ready to get started
<b>A monthly menu is provided to all families and staff</b>							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frequently	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ready to get started
<b>A monthly nutrition and/or physical activity message is included on the monthly menu</b>							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frequently	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ready to get started

**Notes/Reflection**



**Section 5: ECE Provider(s) Role  
During Meal/Snack Times**

**Date of Assessment**

**Mealtime takes place at a regularly scheduled time and as part of children’s daily routine**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Adults caring for children (e.g., teachers, assistants, etc.) have been trained and model appropriate mealtime behavior**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Adults caring for children turn off all visible screens, including televisions, tablets, phones, etc. during mealtime and engage in conversation with the children**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Adults caring for children sit with children at the table during mealtime**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Adults caring for children discuss if children’s stomachs feel full before serving a second helping of food**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**During mealtime, adults caring for children encourage children to try new or less preferred foods**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**A transition activity (e.g., reading a book, coloring activity, listening to quiet music, etc.) is offered to children when they’re done with their meal**

	Frequently		Sometimes		Never		Ready to get started
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**Notes/Reflection**

## Action Plan

If your program is currently implementing a programmatic improvement plan, or uses a standard action plan template to make changes in your program, you might consider weaving your goals from the Positive Eating Environment Self Assessment for ECE Programs into those improvement plans for a coordinated effort. If your program does not have an existing plan, below you will find an easy-to-use template for action planning.

### Tips for completing your action plan:

- Share ideas and planning with staff in your program to ensure clear expectations
- Determine how many steps you think it will take to achieve a goal;
- Define the steps and determine who is responsible for each step; and
- Set a time-line for the completion of a goal and dates by which each step should be complete.

## Action Plan Worksheet

Start Date: \_\_\_\_\_

ECE Program Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Goal: \_\_\_\_\_

Objectives/Steps	Action Items (Child, Family, Program Staff)	Program Environment	Program Policies
<b>Sample Objective/ Step:</b> Update menus over a three month period to integrate more fresh fruits and vegetables	Discuss the changes with the children and how they help them grow up strong and healthy.	Update menu boards to share information about fresh fruits and vegetables.	Include healthy eating as a required topic at family orientation
<b>Who is responsible?</b>	Program Staff	Program Director, Cook, Teachers	Program Director
<b>Date</b>	June 1st	July 1st	August 1st
<b>Objective/Step</b>			
<b>Who is responsible?</b>			
<b>Date</b>			



## Resources

There are many resources available to help you in your efforts to create a positive mealtime environment. Below, you will find a selection of recommended resources. You might also find it helpful to explore the Let's Move! Child Care ([www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org](http://www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org)) website, which has an extensive list of resources by topic area as well as a page of resources that may be particularly useful to family child care providers (<https://healthykidshealthyfuture.org/family-child-care-resources/>).

## Comprehensive Resource

**Child and Adult Care Food Program – “Updated Child and Adult Care Food Program Meal Patterns: Child and Adult Meals”** - [http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cacfp/CACFP\\_MealBP.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cacfp/CACFP_MealBP.pdf)

**Child and Adult Care Food Program – “Nutrition and Wellness Tips for Young Children”** - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nutrition-wellness-tips-young-children> - provides information on healthy nutrition options, strategies on creating positive meal environment, and how to support family style meals.

## Fruits

**Child and Adult Care Food Program – “Build a Healthy Plate with Fruits”** - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fruits.pdf> (English)  
[http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell\\_fruits-sp.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell_fruits-sp.pdf) (Spanish)

## Vegetables

**Child and Adult Care Food Program – “Build a Healthy Plate with Vegetables”** - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/vegetables.pdf> (English)  
[http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell\\_vegetables-sp.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell_vegetables-sp.pdf) (Spanish)



## Beverages

**Child and Adult Care Food Program – “Build a Healthy Plate with Milk”** - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/milk.pdf> (English)  
[http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell\\_milk-sp.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell_milk-sp.pdf) (Spanish)

**Child and Adult Care Food Program – “Make Water Available Throughout the Day”** - <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/water.pdf> (English)  
[http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell\\_water-sp.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/tn/nutwell_water-sp.pdf) (Spanish)

## Standards and Regulations

Excerpts from standards and regulations related to nutrition and healthy eating environments in ECE programs are provided below. This includes highlights from the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), and Preventing Childhood Obesity in Early Care and Education Programs, Second Edition, Selected Standards from Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards, Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd Edition (Preventing Childhood Obesity).

CACFP - <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-04-25/pdf/2016-09412.pdf>

- **Fruits:** Serve a variety of fruits and choose whole fruits (fresh, canned, frozen, or dried) more often than juice. (optional best practice)
- **Vegetables:** Provide at least one serving each of dark green vegetables, red and orange vegetables, beans and peas (legumes), starchy vegetables, and other vegetables once per week. (optional best practice)
- **Milk:** Requires that unflavored low-fat (1 percent) or unflavored fat-free (skim) milk be served to children two through five years old.
- **Water:** Requires potable drinking water to be offered to children throughout the day and available to children upon their request throughout the day.



HSPPS – <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

- **Teaching and the learning environment. 1302.31 (e)(2):** A program must implement snack and meal times in ways that support development and learning.... Snack and meal times must be structured and used as learning opportunities that support teaching staff-child interactions and foster communication and conversations that contribute to a child's learning, development, and socialization. Programs are encouraged to meet this requirement with family style meals when developmentally appropriate. A program must also provide sufficient time for children to eat, not use food as reward or punishment, and not force children to finish their food.
- **Child Nutrition. 1302.44 (a)(1):** A program must design and implement nutrition services that are culturally and developmentally appropriate, meet the nutritional needs of and accommodate the feeding requirements of each child, including children with special dietary needs and children with disabilities. Family style meals are encouraged as described in §1302.31 (e)(2).
- **Child Nutrition. 1302.44 (a)(2)(iii):** Serve three-to-five-year-olds meals and snacks that conform to USDA requirements in 7 CFR parts 210, 220, and 226, and are high in nutrients and low in fat, sugar, and salt.
- **Child Nutrition. 1302.44(a)(2)(ix):** Make safe drinking water available to children during the program day.

**Preventing Childhood Obesity** - <http://cfoc.nrckids.org/WebFiles/PreventingChildhoodObesity2nd.pdf>

- **Use of USDA – CACFP Guidelines:** All meals and snacks and their preparation, service, and storage should meet the requirements for meals of the child care component of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)
- **Availability of Drinking Water:** Clean, sanitary drinking water should be readily available, in indoor and outdoor areas, throughout the day.
- **100% Fruit Juice:** The facility should serve only full-strength (100%) pasteurized fruit juice or full-strength fruit juice diluted with water from a cup to children twelve months of age or older.
- **Socialization During Meals:** Caregivers/teachers and children should sit at the table and eat the meal or snack together. Family style meal service, with the serving platters, bowls, and pitchers on the table so all present can serve themselves, should be encouraged, except for infants and very young children who require an adult to feed them.
- **Written Nutrition Plan:** Meals and snacks provide the caregiver/teacher an opportunity to model appropriate mealtime behavior and guide the conversation, which aids in children’s conceptual, sensory language development and eye/hand coordination.

**Notes/Reflections**





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1-800-227-5125 • [health@ecetta.info](mailto:health@ecetta.info) • <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health>