

Combating food insecurity and supporting child nutrition through the child care sector ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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Excerpts from introduction

In the United States, families with children under age 6 are more likely to experience food insecurity than households without children or households with older children.¹ Food insecurity in early childhood is associated with poor health outcomes, decreased learning and academic achievement (Jyoti, Frongillo, and Jones 2005), and lower social and emotional well-being (Slack and Yoo 2005). Moreover, US children in families of color are more likely to experience food insecurity in early childhood, contributing to racial disparities in longer-term outcomes. Against this backdrop, improving food access for young children is a priority. With the majority of children age 5 and younger enrolled in at least one weekly nonparental care arrangement,² a promising venue for these efforts is the settings in which young children regularly receive care.

In this brief, we highlight two promising examples of partnerships between child care providers and food access initiatives. Both of these partnerships received funding for their efforts from the Walmart Foundation Healthier Food Access grant, which provides support to innovative programs addressing food access. We focus on three particularly promising strategies: one that supports children and families directly, one that fosters the capacity of child care providers and their ability to support child nutrition in their own care settings, and one that organizes at a systems level to better coordinate efforts that target families with young children. Finally, we provide evidence-based recommendations for building these partnerships in local communities.

Why Families with Young Children Need More Support

Early childhood is a critical time of physical, social, and emotional development. Limited access to nutritious food can disrupt healthy development, with both short- and long-term consequences (de Oliveira et al. 2020; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Food insecurity in early childhood is associated with behavioral problems, anemia, and asthma at rates higher than those found among children who are food secure (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015).

Not only is the experience of childhood food insecurity consequential for short- and long-term health outcomes, but it is also, unfortunately, a prevalent experience. Almost 15 percent of US households with children under age 6 were food insecure in 2020, higher than the national average of 10.5 percent among all households (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021). Historically, households with children under age 6 experience substantially higher rates of food insecurity than households with older children.³

Despite facing higher levels of food insecurity than other households, households with young children have access to fewer supports. School-age children may benefit from free or reduced-price meals through schools, which aren't available to most families with children under age 6. ⁴ The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is the primary federal mechanism that supports the provision of food to young children in child care settings (see box 1 for more information).

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: food insecurity ^[4]

nutrition ^[5]

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