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GETTING STARTED WITH FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

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GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing and food and agriculture education into school systems and early and education settings.

What is farm to early care and education?

Farm to early care and education is a set of strategies and activities that offer increased access to healthy, local foods, gardening opportunities and food-based activities to enhance the quality of educational experience in all types of early care and education settings (e.g., preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, programs in K-12 school districts). In addition to promoting health, wellness and high quality educational opportunities, farm to early care and education also expands healthy food access, encourages family and community engagement, provides additional market opportunities for farmers and supports thriving communities.

Getting started

Farm to early care and education offers multiple strategies to improve the health of children, increase the quality of educational experiences and promote valuable family engagement opportunities. This list provides easy first steps to develop a lasting initiative in your community:

- 1 Assess where you are and where you'd like to be.** Are your goals centered on:
 - Purchasing healthy, local foods to be served in meals or snacks?
 - Establishing a garden or offering gardening experiences?
 - Enhancing the learning environment with other food and agriculture related activities (e.g., field trips to farms or farmers markets, cooking lessons, etc.)?
 - Engaging families in local food access and education?
 - All of the above?
- 2 Form a team and collaborate.** Teachers and administrators, parents, Child Care Resource and Referral staff, local farmers, community organizations, and even local colleges/universities can play important roles in establishing a sustainable farm to early care and education program.
- 3 Establish one or two attainable goals to get started.** Some ideas include:
 - Identify snack or meal items that you would like to transition to local.
 - Find a farmer, farmers market, grocery store or wholesaler to connect you to local foods. Search LocalHarvest (localharvest.org) or reach out to your National Farm to School Network State Lead for help making these connections!

FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN ACTION

Many programs exist across the country—here are two examples:

In-home providers offer experiential education through a backyard garden

In Los Angeles, Ethan and Friends Family Child Care owner Shaunte Taylor has transformed her modest inner-city backyard to include raised beds, a compost bin, multiple fruit trees, and a chicken coop. Now, children plant seeds, amend the soil while investigating worms and insects, water plants, and harvest and prepare simple recipes using their garden produce.

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WHY FARM TO SCHOOL?

KIDS WIN

Farm to school (inclusive of farm to early care and education) provides all kids access to nutritious, high quality, local food so they are ready to learn and grow. Farm to school activities enhance classroom education through hands-on learning related to food, health, agriculture and nutrition.

FARMERS WIN

Farm to school can offer new financial opportunities for farmers, fishers, ranchers, food processors and food manufacturers by opening the doors to an institutional market worth billions of dollars.

COMMUNITIES WIN

Buying from local producers and processors reduces the carbon footprint of food transportation while stimulating the local economy. Educational activities such as school gardens and composting programs help to create a healthy environment around the school community.

The National Farm to School Network has more resources on this topic and others, as well as contact information for people in your state and region who are working on farm to school and farm to early care and education programs. Visit farmtoschool.org for more information and to join our network.

- Identify curricula, activities or books related to gardens, preparing and eating healthy, local foods or learning about where food comes from and how it grows.
- Plan a local foods meal, snack, day, or event.
- Reach out to a local nursery or hardware store for donations or other support for starting an edible garden.
- Plan a farm or farmers market field trip, a farmer visit to the classroom or host a tasting of local produce.

4 Learn from others. If you are running into an obstacle, it is likely that there is someone who has run into it before! Some places to connect and learn from others include:

- The **National Farm to School Network** website. Find resources and contact information for people in your state and region who are working on farm to school and farm to early care and education. Sign up for our e-newsletter to receive regular communication about news, resources and opportunities.
- The **farm to preschool** website (farmtopreschool.org). Find information and case studies specific to early care and education settings.
- Your county or state's **Child Care Resource and Referral agency**. These agencies can provide resources and ways to learn about and connect with other early care and education programs and sites that are implementing farm to early care and education activities. Find your local agencies at www.usa.childcareaware.org.
- The **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** staff in your state. Learn how CACFP can help you make local food more economical and can free up resources for other farm to early care and education activities. CACFP state agency contacts can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp.

5 Promote farm to early care and education in your community. Ideas include sharing information and recipes in parent newsletters, posting garden or field trip photos to a website or on social media, or inviting local media to your activities.

K-12 schools versus early care and education settings

A few important distinctions between school districts and early care and education settings:

Local foods procurement: Early care and education programs tend to purchase at smaller volumes and generally do not offer a la carte choices or multiple meal options. Small purchasing volumes can be a good fit for small farmers who may not have enough volume to work with an entire school district.

Class size: Early care and education programs tend to have smaller numbers of children, and their schedules can vary (child care might be for only a few hours, or it could be a full day). Smaller groups of children provide greater flexibility, while shorter days can limit some activities.

Curriculum: Common Core is the standard for K-12, while experiential education is highly encouraged in early care and education settings. This is a great fit with many farm to early care and education activities such as gardening, cooking and taste tests.

Parental involvement: parental involvement tends to be strong during the early childhood years, which can be a huge asset for farm to early care and education programming.

FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN ACTION

Oregon Child Development Coalition works directly with local farmers to procure food for meals

Early care centers have proven to be an ideal market for La Esperanza Farm, an incubator farm for local organic and sustainable Latino farmers in Forest Grove, Oregon. Working closely with the Oregon Child Development Coalition's USDA Food Services Specialist, Head Start centers now receive deliveries of local produce for meals, nourishing both children and their community.

