



Credit: Erin McKee VanSlooten

# LOCAL PROCUREMENT FOR CHILD CARE CENTERS

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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 care and education settings.

**F**arm to early care and education enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by enhancing food purchasing and education practices in early care and education settings. Farm to early care and education activities expose young children to healthy, local foods through meals and snacks, taste tests, lessons, cooking activities, gardening, field trips, farmer visits and more. These activities not only promote health, wellness and important hands-on educational opportunities, but also increase access to healthy foods, encourage and support family engagement, provide additional market opportunities for farmers and support thriving communities.

### Sources of local food

There are many different types of farm to early care and education activities. One option is to serve local food, like fruits, vegetables, proteins, dairy and grains, in meals and snacks. Child care centers can source locally-grown food in the following ways:

- 1 Through your food distributor or food service management company:** Many distributors and food service management companies (FSMCs) can supply locally grown food. If you are already purchasing from a distributor or working with an FSMC, start by asking them where their food comes from and requesting local items. You can also think about incorporating a preference for local foods in future contracts.
- 2 Directly from a local farmer:** When purchasing directly from a farmer, you may be able to arrange delivery directly to your center, or pick up at a convenient location. Your National Farm to School Network State Lead may be able to help you find farms in your area. Find your State Lead at [www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org).
- 3 Your local grocery store or food co-op:** Many grocery stores and co-ops carry locally-grown food. Look for signs or labels that say where the food came from or if it's not labeled, ask!
- 4 Your local farmers' market:** If you only need small quantities, you can shop at a farmers' market. If need larger quantities, you can arrange with a farmer in advance to pick up a larger order at the market. Find a market near you: [www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets](http://www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets).
- 5 An edible garden:** Edible gardens are perfect for smaller amounts of produce. Fun, easy foods to start with include snap peas, radishes, lettuce, herbs, cucumbers and squash. If you are unsure about your soil quality or have limited space to grow, consider growing food in pots or containers. Contact your county's Cooperative Extension for advice on starting, maintaining and harvesting from a garden in your region: [www.nifa.usda.gov/Extension](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/Extension).
- 6 Other sources of local foods:** Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, food hubs, food processors or manufacturers, farmer cooperatives or your current caterer. Find sources of local food in your area: [www.ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/food-directories](http://www.ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/food-directories).

### CACFP and local food

Did you know that if you participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), you can use those funds to do things like buy food from farmers' markets and plant edible gardens?

For more information, see the Local Foods in the Child and Adult Care Food Program Memorandum from USDA: [www.fns.usda.gov/local-foods-child-and-adult-care-food-program](http://www.fns.usda.gov/local-foods-child-and-adult-care-food-program).

For information on procuring local foods for CACFP programs, visit [www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp).

### Tips for child care centers

Serving local food in meals and snacks is rewarding but can be challenging at first. Here are some ideas to help make serving local foods successful in your center:

- **Start small!** Begin by deciding which local foods you want to serve. You could also start by trying one local item each month.
- **Define "local." You get to decide.** Local can mean from in your county, in your state or in your region. Consider your area's growing season and the types of foods that grow and are produced near you.
- **Ask questions.** It's okay to ask farmers questions about their products. Things you might want to ask about include pricing, available quantities, delivery, food safety and liability insurance. Farmers may also have tips and recipes for using new foods.
- **Fruits and vegetables are an easy place to start.** Purchasing local milk can be easy, too. If you live in a colder climate, think about foods that might be available year round like eggs, grains, meats or beans.
- **Create a flexible menu.** Plan different menus for each season and add "seasonal fruit or vegetable" to your menu, so you have flexibility to use whatever is fresh and in season.
- **Start by purchasing items that can be used in their whole form or that can be easily cut up and prepared.** For example, small apples or pears, berries, sweet peas or potatoes that can be left whole for baking are all good places to start. Some products that can be easily sliced/chopped and ready to serve are: tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots and broccoli.
- **Buy foods in bulk when they are in season.** Farmers are often willing to offer discounts on large purchases. If you have room for storage, think about buying larger quantities of foods that keeps well, such as: apples, carrots, winter squash, sweet potatoes, frozen berries, beans and grains.
- **Get children involved.** The farmers' market is a great place for a field trip and kids love to help pick out new foods for meals and snacks. Children can also help with simple preparation like washing produce and mixing salads.

### Farm to early care and education in action: A model from Minnesota

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) worked with childcare partner New Horizon Academy (NHA) to launch their Farm to Early Care initiative in Minnesota in 2012. Because NHA has a centralized food distribution system and an exclusive purchase agreement with their prime distributor, they were not able to purchase from farms directly. NHA's distributor, however, was able to identify which of their local, Minnesota producers could supply fruits, vegetables and wild rice for the program. NHA was then able to order those products for delivery to centers through their regular distribution process.

To build relationships with farmers, IATP visited each of the farms to learn more about the farmers and to share with them how their foods would be used. They also took photos of the farmers and vegetables in their fields to share with children and their families to reinforce the connection with where the foods were grown. NHA's Farm to Early Care initiative is still operating in all 62 New Horizon Academy Centers throughout Minnesota, reaching over 7,500 children.

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The National Farm to School Network has a wide variety of resources and information about farm to school in early care and education. For more information visit [farmtoschool.org/earlychildhood](http://farmtoschool.org/earlychildhood).