

# Promoting Healthy Eating and Nutrition for Head Start Children and Families

*ACF-OHS-IM-25-03*

**March 26, 2025**



ADMINISTRATION FOR  
**CHILDREN & FAMILIES**  
Office of Head Start



# HOUSEKEEPING ITEMS

- All participants are in listen-only mode.
- Certificates of Attendance will be provided via chat and email.
- Closed Captioning is optional.
- Participate in discussion via chat.
- Submit all questions via Q&A.
- This presentation will be recorded and available on-demand on HeadStart.gov.





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# Today's Speakers



**Catherine Granito**  
Senior Advisor  
US Dept of Health  
and Human Services



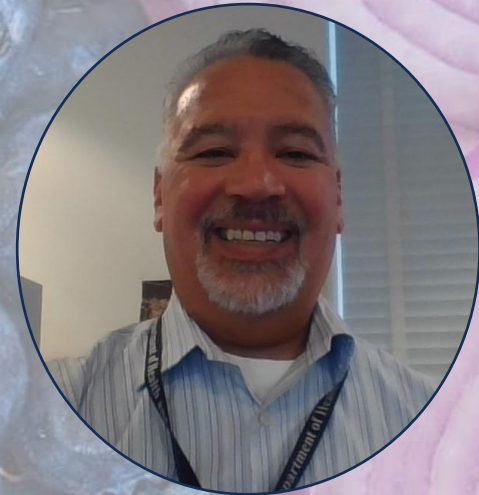
**Andrew Gradison**  
Acting Assistant Secretary  
Administration for Children  
and Families



**Captain Tala Hooban**  
Acting Director  
Office of Head Start



**Jessica Bialecki**  
Director Policy and Planning  
Office of Head Start



**Marco Beltran DrPH**  
Health and Family  
Engagement Branch Chief  
Office of Head Start

# Agenda: An Overview of ACF-OHS-IM-25-03

- Affirm Head Start's role in ensuring children and families have access to healthy food and nutrition services
- Review relevant statutory and regulatory requirements
- Share resources and partnerships available to support these efforts
- Provide tips and innovative strategies to foster enthusiasm for healthy eating in early learning environments

## Promoting Healthy Eating and Nutrition for Head Start Children and Families ACF-OHS-IM-25-03

ACF Administration for Children and Families	U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	
	1. Log Number: ACF-OHS-IM-25-03	2. Issuance Date: 03/19/2025
	3. Originating Office: Office of Head Start	
	4. Key Words: Nutrition	

### INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

TO: All Head Start Recipients

SUBJECT: Promoting Healthy Eating and Nutrition for Head Start Children and Families

#### INFORMATION:

Head Start programs play a vital role in supporting healthy eating and nutrition for enrolled children and families. Access to healthy foods and other nutrition services helps children grow, develop, and learn. Good nutrition is essential for brain development and provides children with the energy needed to stay active and focused throughout the program day. A balanced diet helps strengthen a child's immune system, reducing the risk of infections and illnesses. It also prevents childhood obesity, which can lead to chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes.

This Information Memorandum (IM) affirms the critical role of Head Start programs in ensuring children and families have access to healthy food and comprehensive nutrition services. It also includes an overview of relevant statutory and regulatory requirements and reminds programs of the resources and partnerships available to support robust nutrition services for children and families. Lastly, this IM provides tips to foster enthusiasm for healthy eating in early learning environments and encourages Head Start programs to use innovative strategies to promote health and nutrition. An appendix of additional resources is included to guide programs in their efforts.

#### BACKGROUND:

Head Start programs play an important role in achieving healthy outcomes for children and families. Nutrition services can be particularly impactful for families who experience food insecurity or live in communities where affordable, healthy food is less available. Research indicates that Head Start children are more likely to receive dental checkups and have healthy eating patterns than non-participants. They also have lower Body Mass Index (BMI) scores and are less likely to be overweight compared to children in other non-parental care (Lee et al., 2013 [2]). Obese, overweight, or underweight children who participate in Head Start have a significantly healthier BMI by kindergarten (Lumeng, et al., 2015 [3]). Additionally, Head Start graduates have better health status as adults than non-graduates; they are 7 percent less likely to be in poor health as adults than their siblings who did not attend Head Start (Johnson, 2010; Deming, 2009 [4]).

The Head Start Program Performance Standards (the Performance Standards) prioritize nutrition services that are culturally and developmentally appropriate and meet each child's individual needs, including those with disabilities, allergies, and special dietary needs (45 CFR §1302.44(a)(1)). In doing so, programs help children experience a variety of nutritious foods, provide mealtime opportunities for socialization and enrichment, and support families in learning about the importance of healthy foods at home.

Head Start programs promote access to healthy food and nutrition in many ways. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Increasing access to and availability of healthy foods for children and families in classrooms, during home visits or group socialization activities, and during parent and family engagement activities.
- Supporting families with pregnancy, post-partum, and breastfeeding, as well as ensuring the nutritional needs of infants and toddlers are fully met.
- Helping families access affordable, healthy food options at home.
- Providing families with education on nutrition and the importance of physical activity.
- Reducing administrative burden and supporting families to get connected with other nutrition-related services for which they might be eligible, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).
- Using registered dietitians or nutritionists to support the implementation of Head Start requirements for healthy nutrition.
- Making safe drinking water available to children during the program day.
- Providing materials and equipment for center-based or home-based learning activities related to healthy eating, such as supplies to create gardens, greenhouses, and





# Background



# Head Start's Nutrition Services

- ❑ Head Start programs promote access to healthy food and nutrition in many ways. This includes, but is not limited to:
  - ✓ Increasing **availability of and access to healthy foods** for children and families in classrooms, during home visits or group socialization activities, and during parent and family engagement activities.
  - ✓ Supporting families with **pregnancy, post-partum, and breastfeeding**
  - ✓ Helping families access **affordable, healthy food options at home** and providing families with **education on nutrition** and the importance of **physical activity**.
  - ✓ Reducing administrative burden and supporting families to **get connected with other nutrition-related services** for which they might be eligible
  - ✓ Using **registered dietitians or nutritionists** to support the implementation of Head Start requirements for healthy nutrition.
  - ✓ Making **safe drinking water** available to children during the program day.



# Importance of Head Start's Nutrition Services

Head Start programs play an important role in achieving healthy outcomes for children and families.

- ✓ Good nutrition is essential for **brain development** and provides children with the **energy** needed to stay active and focused throughout the program day.
- ✓ A balanced diet helps **strengthen a child's immune system, reducing the risk of infections and illnesses.**
- ✓ Healthy foods – rich in vitamins, minerals, and nutrients, and low in saturated fat, added sugars, and salt – are the building blocks for **healthy bones and teeth**
- ✓ Nutrition services can be particularly impactful for **families who experience food insecurity** or live in communities where affordable, healthy food is less available.





# Research on Head Start's Nutrition Services

## ❑ **Research indicates that:**

- Head Start children are more likely to receive dental checkups and have healthy eating patterns than non-participants;
- Head Start children have lower Body Mass Index (BMI) scores and are less likely to be overweight compared to children in other non-parental care (Lee et al., 2013); and
- Obese, overweight, or underweight children who participate in Head Start have a significantly healthier BMI by kindergarten (Lumeng, et al., 2015).

## ❑ **Long-term health outcomes:**

- Head Start graduates have better health status as adults than non-graduates; they are 7 percent less likely to be in poor health as adults than their siblings who did not attend Head Start (Johnson, 2010; Deming, 2009).



# Relevant Statutory and Regulatory Requirements



# Nutrition Requirements for the Teaching and Learning Environment

[Subpart D](#) of the Performance Standards focuses on the health and mental health requirements for Head Start programs. It states that programs must provide high-quality health, oral health, mental health, and nutrition services that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and that will support each child's growth and school readiness ([45 CFR §1302.40](#)). This includes serving foods that are familiar to children as well as new foods. There are various requirements within this subpart that elaborate on what is expected of Head Start programs in the area of nutrition services:

- ❑ All Head Start programs **must design and implement nutrition services that meet dietary needs of each child**, including children with special dietary needs and children with disabilities, to support their growth and school readiness ([45 CFR §1302.44\(a\)\(1\)](#)).
- ❑ To ensure up-to-date child health status, Head Start programs must identify each child's nutritional health needs, considering available health information such as **special dietary requirements, food allergies, and community nutrition issues** ([45 CFR §1302.42\(b\)\(4\)](#)).





# Nutrition Requirements for the Teaching and Learning Environment, *continued*

The Performance Standards at [45 CFR §1302.44](#) detail specific child nutrition requirements, which include:

- Ensuring each child in a program that operates for fewer than six hours per day receives meals and snacks that provide **one third to one half** of the child's daily nutritional needs.
- Ensuring each child in a program that operates for six hours or more per day receives meals and snacks that provide **one half to two thirds** of the child's daily nutritional needs.
- Serving three- to five-year-olds meals and snacks that conform to USDA requirements and are high in nutrients and low in saturated fat, sugar, and salt. Expect possible future updates to nutrition guidelines to reflect the latest science, including providing whole, full-fat dairy for child development.
- Making sure that all children receive a nourishing breakfast by providing nutrient rich foods for children who did not eat breakfast before they arrived at their Head Start center.
- Providing appropriate healthy snacks and meals to each child during group socialization activities in the home-based option.
- Promoting breastfeeding for mothers who wish to breastfeed during program hours. This may include offering facilities to properly store and handle breast milk and making accommodations when needed.
- Connecting families to community lactation consultants or counselors when they choose breastfeeding but need support to be successful.



# Nutrition Requirements for the Teaching and Learning Environment, *continued*

[Subpart C](#) of the Performance Standards focuses on the teaching and learning environment specifically when children are in center-based and family child care programs. The Performance Standards ensure that mealtimes are structured and used as learning opportunities.

- ❑ **Language skills** are strengthened through social conversations and **fine motor abilities** are tested in handling utensils or serving aides.
- ❑ The **social skills** involved in the back and forth of mealtime conversation also help children navigate friendships, turn-taking, and **self-regulation**.



# Nutrition Requirements for the Teaching and Learning Environment, *continued*

- ❑ [Family style dining](#) – when children and teachers sit together for a meal or snack – is encouraged when developmentally appropriate to support consistency between home and school by replicating the experience of eating together as a family. Family style dining also offers a chance for staff to model healthy food choices and the importance of nutrition. Head Start programs are encouraged to use family style meals when developmentally appropriate.
- ❑ Family style meals benefit children by:
  - Encouraging healthy food choices as teachers and peers model positive attitudes toward nutrition.
  - Supporting children to learn in developmentally appropriate ways about concepts such as serving sizes, nutritional food groups, and the value of trying new foods.
  - Offering opportunity for children to practice using appropriately sized utensils to serve themselves and helping to set and clear the table. This improves children's fine motor skills, boosts their self-confidence, and expands their social skills.





# Nutrition Requirements for the Teaching and Learning Environment, *continued*

Programs must implement snack and mealtimes in a manner that supports children's development and learning ([45 CFR §1302.31\(e\)\(2\)](#)):

- ❑ **Support children's understanding of how food and nutrition contribute to growth and overall health**, in alignment with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF).
- ❑ **Make snack and mealtimes a positive experience for children.** This means programs provide sufficient time for children to eat, avoid using food as a reward or punishment, and do not force children to finish their food. The Performance Standards help programs make meals enjoyable by creating [positive eating environments](#) where children are supported to develop and maintain healthy relationships with food.
- ❑ **Promote consistency in mealtime routines between home and school** by providing one-on-one time for infants during bottle feeding. For bottle-fed infants, Head Start programs must hold infants during feeding to support socialization. This one-on-one time helps staff build their relationships with infants. In turn, these safe and trusting relationships provide the foundation for learning and development because they help very young children feel secure and confident about exploring the world around them.



# Nutrition Requirements for Engaging with Families

Parent and family engagement is a cornerstone of comprehensive Head Start services. Programs must partner with families to support their wellbeing and their children's learning and development. Programs are required to:

- ❑ Promote children's and families' health by providing **nutrition education support services** that are understandable to individuals, including individuals with low health literacy ([45 CFR §1302.46\(a\)](#));
- ❑ Collaborate with parents to **discuss their child's nutritional status**, including the importance of healthy eating, the negative health consequences of sugar-sweetened beverages, and the importance of physical activity; and
- ❑ Help parents understand **how to select and prepare nutritious foods** that meet the family's nutrition and food budget needs ([45 CFR §1302.46\(a\)\(1\)\(ii\)](#)).

Programs are strongly encouraged to provide specific information to families about the importance of eating whole foods and minimizing ultra-processed foods and avoiding added sugars such as those in soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages.



# Funding and Partnerships to Support Nutrition Services for Head Start Programs, Children and Families





# The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Head Start

- ❑ All Head Start grant recipients and their delegate agencies are required to participate in United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services Child Nutrition programs, which include the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) as well as the National School Lunch Program and National School Breakfast Program. CACFP provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children in participating programs, including Head Start programs.
- ❑ Implementing the [CACFP meal patterns](#) helps to ensure children receive a variety of nutrient-dense foods, including whole grains, a variety of fresh fruits, and vegetables, all while reducing intake of ultra-processed foods, added sugar intake, and saturated fats.
- ❑ CACFP also provides resources such as the [seasonal buying guide](#) to promote in-season local produce, which is often full of flavor and nutrients, less reliant on chemicals and pesticides, and supports sustainability and local farmers.



# The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Head Start, *continued*

- ❑ The amount and type of food varies based on the meal or snack, as well as the specific age group being served. USDA provides numerous resources to assist program officials in determining how foods credit toward the meal pattern requirements, including the [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) (FBG).
- ❑ Head Start programs are encouraged to speak with the [state agency](#) that administers the CACFP to determine if a food that is not in the FBG is eligible for reimbursement. [Additional videos](#) are available on the Head Start website to support programs with CACFP implementation.
- ❑ Per [45 CFR § 1302.44\(b\)](#), Head Start grant funds may be used to cover any allowable costs for meal services that are not covered by the USDA program. Foods purchased with Head Start grant funds must conform with the nutritional requirements in [45 CFR § 1302.44\(a\)\(2\)\(iii\)](#), including being high in nutrients and low in saturated fat, sugar, and salt. Head Start funds may also be used to pay for food that is provided to families for consumption at home, if they have a specific programmatic purpose related to family engagement.



# The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Head Start

- ❑ WIC is a public health nutrition program administered by the USDA that provides nutrition education, nutritious foods, breastfeeding support, and health care referrals for income-eligible pregnant or postpartum women, infants, and children up to age 5.
- ❑ Head Start programs can support families to determine if they are eligible for WIC and then help them to enroll. Local WIC and Head Start programs work closely together in many communities to support the healthy development of children and families.
- ❑ This strong collaboration at the local level allows the two programs to coordinate their services and maximize use of resources (e.g., funding, staff, space) for children and families. Head Start programs are encouraged to view [suggested strategies and resources](#) to further enhance partnerships with WIC programs at the state and local levels.





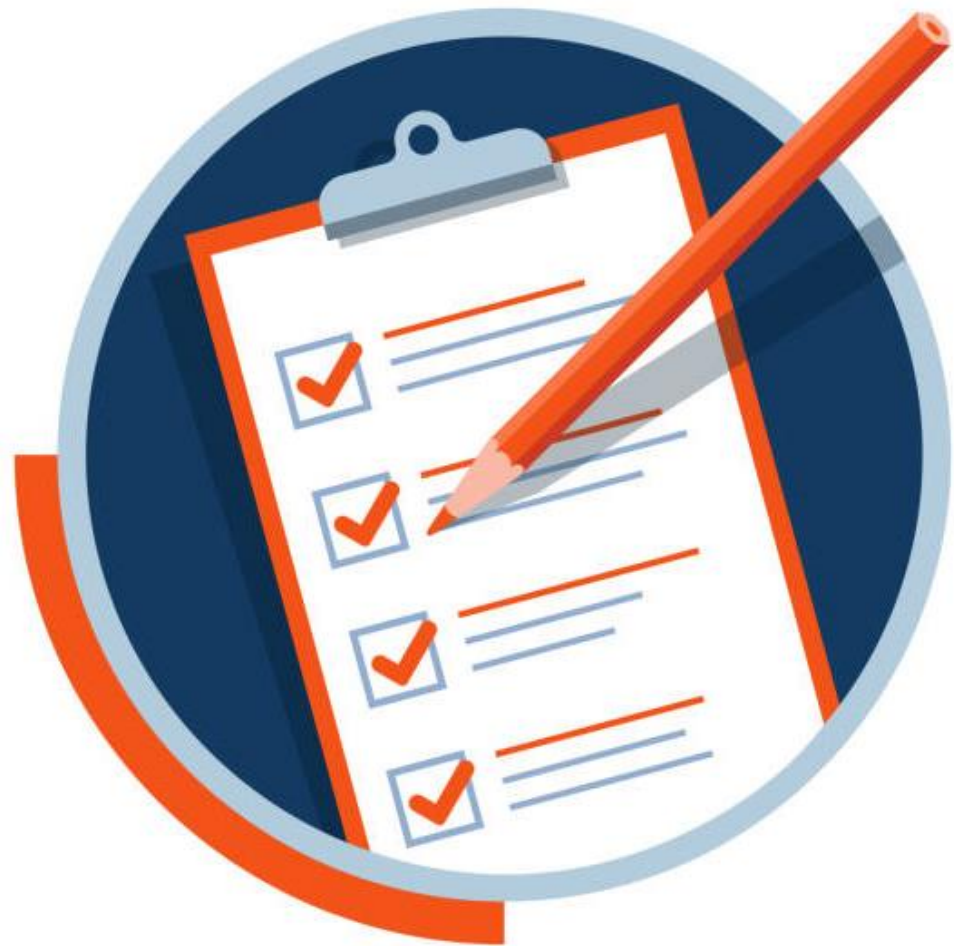
# Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Head Start

- ❑ SNAP is a federal program administered by the USDA that provides food benefits to low-income families to supplement their grocery budget so they can afford the nutritious food essential to health and well-being.
- ❑ Similar to WIC, Head Start programs can support families to determine if they are eligible for SNAP and then help them to enroll. Families who already receive [SNAP are considered categorically eligible for Head Start services](#). This allows for
  - [cross-program recruitment](#);
  - eliminates duplicative and burdensome paperwork for families who are already eligible for a federal public assistance benefit;
  - reinforces access to healthy nutrition services for the children and families Head Start programs serve; and
  - provides opportunities to prioritize education about healthy food consumption, including the importance of minimizing ultra-processed and high-sugar foods.



# Tips to Foster Enthusiasm for Healthy Eating and Nutrition





***We want to hear  
from you!***

What barriers, if any, does  
your program experience in  
providing fresh, whole foods  
and using family style dining?



# Creative Approaches to Healthy Eating and Nutrition Services

- ❑ **Make nutrition education activities fun, interactive, hands on, and part of the daily schedule.** Connecting nutrition activities with reading, math, or science content makes for a comprehensive approach to learning.

*What are some ways programs can do this?*



# Creative Approaches to Healthy Eating and Nutrition Services, *continued*

## ❑ Meal planning and mealtime.

Planning menus that increase access to, and comfortability with, a variety of fresh, healthy ingredients. Creating a culture where families are engaged in meal prepping and children can participate in the process.

*What are some ways programs can do this?*



# Creative Approaches to Healthy Eating and Nutrition Services, *continued*

## ❑ **Increase access to fresh foods.**

Explore opportunities and leverage partnerships to help children and families learn about and access fresh foods through creative experiential opportunities and connections.

*What are some ways programs can do this?*





# Creative Approaches to Healthy Eating and Nutrition Services, *continued*

- ❑ **Breastfeeding and infant nutrition.** [The American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#) recommends that infants be exclusively breastfed for the first six months, then breastfed for at least one year while they are introduced to complementary foods.

*What are some ways programs can do this?*



# Additional Relevant Resources



# Additional Relevant Resources

- [Nourishing Futures: Promoting Healthy Eating and Nutrition for Head Start Children and Families Fact Sheet](#)
- [Subscribe to the Early Childhood Health and Wellness](#) listserv to receive the monthly Small Bites newsletter, which features information and tools to help establish healthy nutrition practices.
- [Nutrition Building Blocks](#) is a free course offered through the Head Start learning management system, the Individualized Professional Development (iPD) Portfolio. Complete the course to earn continuing education units while learning how to integrate healthy nutrition messages into music and movement activities for young children and teachers.
- [Caring for Children with Food Allergies](#) is a resource to help programs prepare to care for children with allergies to specific foods.
- [Watch the CACFP Meal Patterns Webinar](#) to learn about specific CACFP meal pattern requirements.
- [Healthy Feeding from the Start for Expectant Families](#) is a resource to help families understand how they can form healthy feeding habits from the beginning of their child's life.
- These resources offer family-friendly tips for establishing healthy and age-appropriate eating practices at home:
  - [Feeding Your 9-Month-Old](#)
  - [Feeding Your Toddler](#)
  - [Feeding Your Preschooler](#)





# Additional Relevant Resources, *continued*

- [Supporting Food Security and Access to Indigenous Foods for Children and Families in Tribal Early Childhood Programs \(ACF-OHS-IM-25-01\)](#) provides information to Tribal Nations and communities regarding opportunities to use Head Start funding to promote access to healthy Indigenous foods.
- [Growing Head Start Success with Farm to Early Care and Education](#) is a resource to support programs with aligning the Performance Standards and the ELOF with farm to early care and education opportunities.
- [The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#) leads prevention, nutrition, and physical activity programs, and has additional resources:
  - **Eat Healthy: Birth to Age 2**  
English: [Build a Healthy Eating Routine for Your Baby \(Birth to Age 2\)](#)  
Spanish: [https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/DGA\\_FactSheet\\_Babies-SP-508.pdf](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/DGA_FactSheet_Babies-SP-508.pdf)
  - **Eat Healthy: Kids & Teens**  
English: [Help Your Child Build a Healthy Eating Routine](#)  
Spanish: [Ayuda a tu hijo o hija a desarrollar una rutina de alimentación saludable](#)
  - **Cut Down on Added Sugars**  
English: [Cut Down on Added Sugars](#)  
Spanish: [Reduce el consumo de azúcares añadidos](#)
  - **Cut Down on Saturated Fats**  
English: [Cut Down on Saturated Fat](#)  
Spanish: [Reduce el consumo de grasa saturada](#)



# Closing

- ❑ This webinar is the first in our Head Start Nutrition and Healthy Eating campaign.
- ❑ We will be hosting upcoming webinars and distributing resources to **showcase exemplary programs** to share their approaches to address food insecurity, promote healthy eating at home, and build partnerships around nutrition and tapping into external funding.
- ❑ If you are experiencing any barriers serving fresh, whole foods in your program and didn't have a chance to share during this webinar, please reach out to us to let us know about these challenges. You can email us at [ohs\\_policy@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:ohs_policy@acf.hhs.gov), or contact your Regional Office.
- ❑ *Be on the lookout for more details to come!*

