

Engage Families with Farm to ECE



Early childhood sites can foster strong family partnerships with farm to ECE activities.

Family engagement is central to early care and education quality. When families are involved in education, children benefit, the program benefits, and families benefit.

Farm to early care and education (farm to ECE) can be used as a tool to promote successful family partnerships.

Through farm to ECE's emphasis on health, community connections, local food, hands-on learning, and diversity, it can also

- Promote social and racial equity,
- Inspire parent-child activities, and
- Help sites collaborate with families to determine their needs, interests, strengths, and goals.

Read below for ideas on how to use farm to ECE to engage families.



CONNECT FAMILIES TO COMMUNITY HEALTH RESOURCES

Use this pathway to take small steps to connect your families to a whole host of local resources from food pantries to farmers' markets.

Put together a list or make a map of area food pantries to have on hand in case of emergency.

Create a bulletin board that features info on food assistance, farmers' markets, and healthy recipe ideas.

Invite a WIC or FoodShare Outreach Specialist to talk about food assistance options at a parent café.

Organize a grocery store or farmers' market tour. At grocery store tours, store dietitians can share ideas for shopping more healthfully.

Did you know?

Your families that participate in FoodShare/SNAP or WIC can use their benefits to buy fresh and local food at farmers' markets.



BEST PRACTICES

Consider these ideas when engaging families in any type of activity.

- Host events close to where families **work, live, play, shop, or worship**.
- Engage fathers, mothers, as well as **aunts, uncles, and grandparents**. Additional family members may have special skills (such as cooking knowledge) that can support farm to ECE.
- **Communicate frequently and in different ways**, and **make it as personalized as possible**, e.g. share photos of children in the garden on social media.
- Provide opportunities for different types of caregivers to contribute:
 - **The 'I have no time' parent:** See impactful, but simple 'Drop-Off and Pick-Up Ideas' below.
 - **The artist:** The artistic parent can help organize sing-alongs in the garden or help design signage for the kale patch.
 - **The instructor:** These family members can help children explore seeds or read stories about vegetable soup.
 - **The leader:** The leader can organize and motivate families to participate in a Harvest Day event.
 - **The quiet collaborator:** The quiet collaborator can help you assemble your program recipe book. Solicit the recipes from parents and then pass along to the collaborator to help assemble and print copies.
 - **The organizer:** The organizer can assemble a calendar of who will weed the garden.
- Provide a **notebook/daily diary** for each student to keep in his/her backpack to send messages to and from school and home regarding a child's progress. Make a note of a new food he tried or a garden task she particularly enjoyed.



DROP-OFF AND PICK-UP IDEAS

Here are quick, but meaningful engagement ideas for drop-off and pick-up time:

- **Organize a food taste test event.** See *Resource Toolbox* below for 'I Tried It' sticker printable!
- **Send home a print-out of a food-themed song** to sing in the car, on a walk, or on the bus ride home.
- At drop-off, **poll parents about their favorite vegetable.** Have children graph the results and share with parents at pick-up.
- **Pass out recipe cards** of a favorite meal or snack.
- **Host a farmstand** at pick-up featuring produce from your garden.
- **Share a detail.** Instead of saying 'She did fine today,' when parents ask, share 'She loved dressing up like a baker today in the dramatic play area!'



CULTIVATE A PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT THAT PROMOTES HEALTH

You can create a program environment that promotes health and celebrates the diverse cultures of your families.

Tweak your space, menu, and atmosphere

- Assess your toys, games, blocks, and books. When funds are available, add play food and books that feature diverse food and people.
- Check out these [10 steps to breastfeeding friendly child care centers](#).
- Cultivate a garden! When planning and harvesting a garden,
 - Include plants that are reflective of your families' ancestries and/or diverse culinary preferences. Examples may include **squash, bok choy, cilantro, okra, and collard greens**.
 - Include garden signage in native languages of parents.
 - Share garden produce with families and caregivers to take home and try.
- Add other types of meat and meat alternatives to the menu that resonate with your families. **Local options include black beans and nuts.**
- Be a CSA drop-off site: a farmer would drop off weekly boxes of produce that your families and other neighbors have signed up for ahead of time. Find CSAs using csacoalition.org.



Engage parents in dialogue

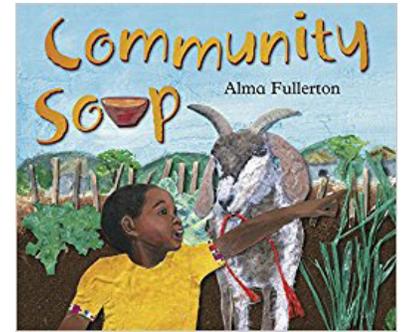
- Ask your families if there are holidays or other food traditions that they would like to be incorporated into the program's celebrations.
- Ask parents for recipe ideas to be included in the cycle menu of the program. For more inspiration and resources, read about [Massachusetts's efforts to incorporate culturally appropriate menu items](#).
- Discuss children's food milestones and general nutrition with parents.

Organize fun events and activities

- Organize an event for parents on how to select and prepare nutritious foods that meet their nutrition and budget needs. Themes might include **crock pot cooking, sheet pan dinners, and healthy snacks**.
- Request beloved recipes from your program's families and assemble into a cookbook. *See Resource Toolbox below for template.*

HELP PARENTS PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN LEARNING

- Print and hand out or email parents 3 questions to ask children and their family members about what they ate that week, such as "Did you try something new this week?". This can be a great family mealtime activity.
- Host a **family lending library** that celebrates food and culture. Great books to include:
 - *Rainbow Stew* by Cathryn Falwell
 - *Round is a Tortilla: A Book of Shapes* by Roseanne Thong
 - *Round is a Mooncake: A Book of Shapes* by Roseanne Thong
 - *What Shall I Make?* by Nandini Iyer
 - *The Ugly Vegetables* by Grace Lin
 - *Community Soup* by Alma Fullerton
- Provide opportunities for parents to identify developmental milestones while cooking or gardening together, e.g. "Your child is working on balance by pulling him/herself up using the tree stumps in the garden". Pass out the [Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards Family Tip Sheet for Health and Physical Development](#) as support.
- Model for parents how to identify the emotions of their infants - such as surprise, happiness, and sadness - in the garden or at the dinner table. "You are surprised by the tartness of the apple!"
- Talk to parents about ways that older children can get involved at meal time such as sprinkling spices or tearing up lettuce leaves.
- Create a farm to ECE themed literacy bag or book buddy.



FAMILY RESOURCE TOOLBOX

- Introduce your families to your program's farm to ECE activities with this editable [letter](http://bit.ly/FamilyLetter) (<http://bit.ly/FamilyLetter>).
- Learn about caregivers' interests with this [questionnaire](http://bit.ly/FamilyQs) (<http://bit.ly/FamilyQs>).
- Print 'I Tried It' stickers using our [free template](http://bit.ly/ITriedItStickers) and Avery 1.5" round labels #8293 (<http://bit.ly/ITriedItStickers>).
- Use this [recipe template](http://bit.ly/RecipeTemplate) to make a program cookbook (<http://bit.ly/RecipeTemplate>).
- Hand out this [list of easy food and nature activities](http://bit.ly/FarmtoECEFamily) (<http://bit.ly/FarmtoECEFamily>).

Questions? Get in touch!

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