Meal Service for CACFP Operators during COVID-19

This tip sheet provides Child and Adult Care Food Program CACFP Operators with guidance for serving meals in child care settings during California’s Coronavirus (COVID–19) response. It is based on the July 17, 2020, California COVID–19 Updated Guidance: Child Care Programs and Providers, available at https://files.covid19.ca.gov/pdf/guidance-childcare--en.pdf, which was developed by the California Department of Social Services and the California Department of Education (CDE), as well as other COVID–19-related nutrition communications referenced in this document.

Meal Service in Child Care Settings

While physical distancing and enhanced hygiene practices can be challenging in early child care settings, every attempt should be made to achieve these goals before, during, and after meal service.

The following is a list of practices designed to reduce the risk of COVID–19 transmission during CACFP meal service:

- Do not practice family-style meal service (FSMS), as serving utensils, bowls, and pitchers should not be handled by multiple children
- Hold meals outdoors, as weather and space allow
- Separate tables by at least six feet, if possible
- Separate children with separate tables, if possible
- When children must share a table, use name cards to ensure adequate spacing
- If there is not enough space for proper social distancing (at least six feet), take necessary measures to reduce risk (e.g., create smaller mealtime groups and stagger mealtimes to reduce occupancy)

- Ask staff, not children, to handle table and place settings, the distribution of meals and beverages, and keep food covered whenever possible to avoid contamination
- Ensure meals are provided in individual portions and are delivered by staff wearing face masks
- Enforce proper handwashing for staff and children before and after eating
- Use paper goods and disposable plastic utensils
- Do not allow children or staff to share or touch each other's food
- Immediately clean and disinfect dishes, trays, chairs, and tables after meals
Questions and Answers for Meal Service During COVID–19

Question 1—Can we still use FSMS at child care settings during COVID–19?

CACFP Operators should not use FSMS during the COVID–19 pandemic. In FSMS, children serve themselves at a community table, passing bowls and utensils, while adults remain nearby to assist and model. The risk for exposure is heightened during this kind of meal service.

Instead, minimize exposure risk by using meal service models that allow for optimal social distancing. Keep the number of individuals contacting the food as low as possible by preplating the meal and serving directly to the child who will eat it. Staff and children should be seated six feet apart, when space allows, and not close enough to contact another person's food at a community table.

Question 2—What are the recommended meal service styles for the child care setting during the COVID–19 pandemic?

The CACFP regulations require that children must be allowed to serve themselves if a site is implementing FSMS, with the exception of fluids. If fluids, such as milk, are served by the adult, the minimum serving size must be provided.

Since FSMS should not be implemented at this time, the only option is to serve preplated meals. The site can plate the meal in the kitchen or tableside. Keep in mind that if the site plates the meals tableside, then staff must serve all the food components in the minimum quantities specified in the meal patterns. Staff are not permitted to serve components in lesser portions than specified in the meal patterns to accommodate children's requests; however, conversations should be initiated at the table so children understand that they can decide what and how much of each menu item they want to eat.

Question 3—How can we continue to serve healthy meals that meet CACFP guidelines during the COVID–19 pandemic?

Since children can no longer safely pass foods and pitchers of milk, child care centers and homes should preplate meal components. Children cannot choose how much of each component to put on their plate when meals are preplated; all components must be provided in at least the minimum serving size for each age group in order to claim the meal for reimbursement.
Question 4—Are CACFP Operators required to serve grab-and-go meals for parent pick-up?

While CACFP Operators are not required to serve grab-and-go meals, these meals are eligible for reimbursement. Under nationwide noncongregate feeding and meal service time waivers, CACFP sites can provide more than one day’s worth of meals to eligible children by a single meal pick-up delivery.


Question 5—While FSMS is not being used, how can staff continue to support children in maintaining autonomy over their personal eating choices?

Responsive feeding is the practice of providing meals to children in a way that respects their autonomy of choice and natural hunger cues. It is a concept that applies to all meal service styles. Even while serving preplated meals not chosen by children, there are ways staff and caregivers can ensure the environment is responsive to children’s needs and preferences. The following are tips for feeding responsively while FSMS is not in use:

- Adopt an encouraging attitude. For example, let children know when you notice them tasting new things.
- Keep talk about food observational or educational. For example, say, "It looks like we have chicken, apple sauce, and carrots today. Which of these foods do you think will be crunchy?"
- Support children by maintaining a predictable routine, consistent expectations of children and staff at mealtimes, and by acknowledging children can feel their autonomy is being challenged when they are served preplated foods not of their choosing.
- Make it clear to children what control they do have at meals. For example, say, "You can eat what you want from your plate. You get to decide when you’ve had enough."

- Avoid pressuring. For example, do not say, "At least try your meat before you finish."
- Avoid attempts to persuade, even with tone of voice. For example, do not say, "It looks like there’s a lot of broccoli left on your plate."
- Do not force children to finish their plate or a particular food item.
Question 6—Should self-service water remain available?

Per the USDA Policy Memorandum, CACFP 20-2016, Water Availability in the CACFP, available at https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cacfp/CACFP20_2016os.pdf, child care centers and day care homes are required to make water available to children upon request and offer water to children throughout the day. During the COVID–19 pandemic response, child care centers should plan for staff to provide water individually to children rather than using a self-service option, such as a water tank or pitcher.

Question 7—Are there special guidelines for food safety?

There is no evidence suggesting COVID–19 is associated with the handling or consumption of food. Therefore, all staff should use normal and appropriate food safety practices when handling, preparing, and serving food. All staff and children should observe proper handwashing practices when eating food.


Question 8—If all staff are required to wear face masks, how can they eat with the children?

It is not a CACFP requirement for staff to eat with children. Staff can be present at meals wearing masks, in order to assist as needed. Staff can also use the meal as an opportunity to model mealtime physical distancing, sanitary expectations, and other appropriate mealtime behaviors.

Additional Resources

- CDE Nutrition Services Division COVID–19: CDE Handout and Fact Sheets: https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/nutritioncovid19handouts.asp