

Frequently Asked Questions - Food and Nutrition in Early Learning and Child Care Programs 2025

These Frequently Asked Questions respond to inquiries from the sector during and following the information and professional learning sessions in Summer 2025.

All page numbers given in this document are offered as quick references to [Food and Nutrition in Early Learning and Child Care Programs](#).

Menu Planning and Recipe Yields

Q: How do you determine if a food item prepared from scratch can be offered?

- Most recipes included on menus following the previous standards will continue to fit with the new 2025 Food and Beverage Criteria in [Food and Nutrition in Early Learning and Child Care Programs](#) (p. 32).
- Choose recipes made with minimally processed foods from the **Foods to Offer** lists and avoid recipes with ingredients from the **“cannot be offered”** lists.
- Some ingredients not listed and used in large quantities (e.g., tomato sauce used in a pasta dish, cereal used in trail mix) need to be assessed to ensure they align with the % DV criteria.
- The **Menu Checklist** (p. 54) and **Appendix D** (p. 57) provide further guidelines for selecting healthy recipes.

Q: How much protein and vegetables should be added to a mixed dish (e.g., soup, casserole) to ensure each child is offered enough?

- Select recipes where approximately ½ of the ingredients are vegetables and/or fruits, ¼ of the ingredients are protein foods, and ¼ of the ingredients are whole grains.
- When soups, casseroles, and other mixed dishes do not contain enough vegetables, protein, or whole grains, these can be added on the side to complete the meal. For example, offering hummus and whole grain crackers on the side of a vegetable soup or offering rice on the side of a chicken and vegetable stir fry.
- [Canada’s Food Guide](#) has other examples of recipes that fit the criteria, and please also see the **Mixed Dishes** section (p. 43).

Q: How do we determine how much food to prepare if there are no serving sizes?

- Continue to use the same practices for determining recipe yields and how much to prepare. For example, estimate the amount commonly consumed by each child or consult the number of servings stated in the recipe.
- Ensure enough food is prepared so that children can have more if they are still hungry.
- Cooks and educators/providers can monitor how much is usually consumed, as well as the amount of food waste, and adjust accordingly.

Q: How can I minimize time for food preparation?

Some strategies include:

- Use components of leftover meals but serve as a different menu item. For example, if you serve chili and corn bread (made with half whole wheat flour) and you have leftover chili, this could be served over rice on a second day.
- Wash root vegetables (e.g., carrots, sweet potato) well and instead of peeling leave the skin on to keep additional fibre.
- Soak dried beans and lentils overnight to speed up cooking time.
- Select recipes with common ingredients that can be pre-prepped (i.e., washing, drying and chopping vegetables and fruits) to be offered in the same week.
- Batch cook protein foods (e.g., ground meats) to be used in multiple recipes which can then be frozen for later use according to food safety guidelines.

Q: Why do menus have to be posted in advance?

- We've maintained the previous requirement to post menus in advance (p. 2) as this ensures that families know what foods children are being offered.
- The 2025 food and nutrition standards provide additional flexibility to allow changes to planned menus to be made if the substitution is of comparable nutritional value and meets children's dietary needs, including allergies, religious and cultural restrictions, etc. (p. 33).
- Examples of this could include substitution of a different cut of meat or substituting a fruit or vegetable that is in season that is comparable in terms of nutrition. Changes are to be posted at least one day in advance.

Q: Are meals/snacks provided to school-aged children required to meet the Food and Nutrition standards?

- Yes, **Food and Nutrition in Early Learning and Child Care Programs** continues to apply to all regulated child care providers, including those for school-aged children.
- Meals and snacks provided for school-aged children are required to meet the standards.
- [Food and Nutrition in Early Learning and Child Care Programs](#) includes a chart that explains what is required at snack and mealtime (p. 33).
- The **Menu Checklist** (p. 54) gives a checklist for what to offer.

Q: What will the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development do to help operators with increased food costs?

Recognizing the impact of rising costs, the Department provides the discretionary support grant each year, offers Operational Support Funding (OSF), and is developing a new funding model.

% Daily Value

Q: What is %Daily Value (DV) and why is it used to determine which foods can be offered and served?

- %DV is found in the nutrition facts table on food product labels and is a quick reference to determine if a pre-packaged food has little or a lot of certain nutrients.

- In the Food and Beverage criteria, %DV is used to determine if foods not listed in the “to offer” and “cannot offer” list can be served. %DV is used to select products that are lower in saturated fat, sodium, and sugars (less than 15% DV). For whole grain foods, %DV is also used to select products that are higher in fibre (more than 5% DV).
- Using %DV to compare food products is a simplified approach to determine which foods can be offered in ELCC programs using information directly available on the product label. There is no need to re-calculate or adjust the serving sizes listed in the nutrition facts table. When comparing the %DV for products in the same category, the serving sizes listed in the nutrition facts tables will generally be similar and comparable.
- For more information on serving sizes listed in nutrition facts table see: Nutrition labelling: Nutrition facts table - Canada.ca

Q: How do I know the % Daily Value (DV) for sugar if it is not indicated on the Nutrition Facts Table?

If the % DV for sugar is not provided in the Nutrition Facts Table, it can be determined based on the grams listed. For example, 1 gram of sugar corresponds to 1% DV, or 9 grams of sugar corresponds to 9% DV.

Q: If a food meets the % DV criteria, but is on the do not offer list, can it still be offered?

- No, any food on the do not offer lists (or that contains ingredients on the do not offer lists) cannot be offered regardless of if it meets the %DV criteria.
- For example, some breakfast cereals meet all %DV criteria but contain artificial sweeteners and therefore cannot be offered in early learning and child care programs.

Responsive Feeding

Q: How do we encourage children to eat according to the Canada’s Food Guide plate (1/2 of the plate vegetables and fruit, ¼ of the plate whole grains, and ¼ of the plate protein foods) if we are implementing self-serving practices?

- Canada’s Food Guide plate represents what is *offered* to children and not what they are expected to eat.
- The role of Early Learning and Child Care programs is to provide a variety of nutritious foods based on the proportions in Canada’s Food Guide plate, while children decide what and how much to eat.
- Allowing children to self-serve where possible supports them to choose which foods to eat and what amounts based on their hunger and fullness cues and food preferences.
- Please see ***Responsive Feeding*** (p. 13) for more information.

Q: How do you support a child that is requesting multiple servings of one preferred food but refusing other food options (e.g., a child is offered soup with bread and is requesting multiple servings of bread but refusing the soup)?

- Offer more of the preferred food to support the child to decide how much and which foods to eat.

- The educator/provider can use their discretion to determine how many additional servings of the preferred food to offer depending on several factors such as:
 - Remaining quantity of the preferred food available, and
 - Ensuring availability of the preferred food for other children.
- Efforts should be made to prepare enough food, so children are able to ask for more if they are still hungry.
- After the additional servings, communicate with the child there is no more of their preferred food available, gently redirect to other foods offered at the meal/snack, and share when food will be available next.
- Avoid pressuring a child to eat other foods or telling a child they have had too much of a preferred food.

Q: What is a cautious eater or cautious eating?

- “Cautious eating” and “picky eating” are often used interchangeably.
- Picky eating implies that a child is overly particular with their food choices and will refuse new foods.
- Using the term cautious eating instead of picky eating:
 - Offers a more supportive and positive perspective.
 - Recognizes that there are many reasons children may be hesitant to try certain foods such as sensory sensitivities, past food experiences, and stage of development.
 - Acknowledges that all children learn about food and eating at their own pace.

Q: How do you support a cautious eater?

- Use patience with children who are cautious with their eating and give them the time and space to take the lead on what they eat and in what quantities.
- Children may need to be exposed to new foods multiple times in multiple formats, and in a supportive environment before they are ready to accept new foods.
- Avoid pressuring children to eat or try certain foods as this may lead to an increase in cautious eating behaviour, instead gently encourage children to be curious about new foods and explore the food through their senses (i.e., touch and smell).
- Communication with families can also help to identify ways to support each child’s unique needs.

Q: How can educators/providers support and encourage children at mealtimes without pressuring them to eat? Educators and providers can be role models by demonstrating positive, non-judgmental attitudes towards all types of food.

Examples of supportive practices may include:

- Eating with children when possible. When children eat together with peers and supportive adults, they are often encouraged to try new things.
- Allowing children to self-serve at mealtime (with assistance) to support them to make their own food choices.
- Discussing other aspects of food and mealtime such as where food comes from, how food fuels our bodies, and social connection and celebration around food.

- Using more neutral language around food and eating at mealtime.

Q: What if families are concerned that children self-serving is unhygienic?

The practices of self-serving and family style dining help build children's independence, self-esteem and confidence as well as supporting a healthy relationship with food and trying new foods. Educators are key in creating a safe and supportive environment.

If families have concerns about children serving themselves due to illness and germs, you can reassure them by sharing your health and safety practices for implementing family style dining. This should include:

- Proper hand washing.
- Providing smaller amounts of shared food at the table in case of contamination.
- Encouraging children to use appropriate utensils to help themselves from shared dishes.
- Ensuring adequate supervision and educator engagement.
- Sanitation of eating surfaces.

The [Guidelines for Communicable Disease Prevention in Child Care Programs](#) state that proper handwashing is the number one way to minimize the spread of germs and illnesses, and this is reinforced throughout the day. Here are some of the ways the educators support this learning:

- Meal and snack times provide wonderful opportunities for educators to teach good hygiene habits through conversation and role modeling.
- Children are taught to hold utensils by the handle, hold glasses on the side, plates by the edge and bowls by the sides.
- Having the right utensils and equipment also helps children succeed in a safe and healthy way.
- Children are taught to pick up food using utensils like ladles scoops and measuring cups with short handles. Tongs are particularly useful and children enjoy the challenge of the task.

This learning is done in a developmentally appropriate way and if the child is still working on the skill, educators will assist with strategies like hand-over-hand. With this assistance, the child is developing muscle memory and with ample time and practice, these skills are strengthened.

Skill development does not happen in isolation at meal and snack time. There are opportunities throughout the day to embed these skills into the learning environment. Tongs can be used to transfer fine motor materials, ladles and scoops in sand and water-play mimic the technique for scooping from a bowl.

Children in group care are exposed to germs throughout the day, not just at meal and snack times. Intentional practices and strategies can help with reducing exposure to germs while also providing children with opportunities to build independence and confidence.

Q: What if families are concerned that children will not be encouraged to eat healthy foods?

It can reassure families to learn more about the things that educators do to encourage children to eat including:

- Talking about food using neutral language.
- Eating with children.
- Making food accessible with family style dining.
- The benefits educators see when children eat together, which often includes children feeling encouraged to try new things because they see their peers doing so.

Please see the answers in the responsive feeding section of this Q+A for more information, in particular “How can educators/providers support and encourage children at mealtimes without pressuring them to eat?”. Please also see the [Celebrate Feeding](#) project for more resources about responsive feeding.

Cultural Foods

Q: How do we select cultural foods to offer in our program?

- Culturally significant foods will look different for each family and community.
- Consultation with families is the best way to ensure menu items are representative of children and families’ cultural identities and prepared as authentically as possible.
- Invite families to share their cultural foods and eating practices during the registration and intake process, as well as through ongoing communication channels.
- Please see *Inclusive Food Environments* (p. 26) for more information.

Vegetables and Fruit

Q: Can dried fruit be served?

- Dried fruit (including cut up raisins) without added sugar should only be served as part of a meal or in baked goods.
- Dried fruit should not be served on its own as dried fruit sticks to teeth and can increase the risk of cavities.
- Whole grapes and raisins are potential choking hazards for young children under four years of age and are not to be offered.

Q: Does a different dark green vegetable option need to be offered each day?

- It is recommended to offer a variety of dark green vegetables, but it does not need to be a different option each day.
- Examples of dark green vegetables include: asparagus, green beans, bok choy/Chinese cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, edamame, fiddle heads, endive, kale/collards, leeks, lettuce (romaine), mesclun mix, mustard greens, okra, peas, green pepper, seaweed, snow peas, spinach, and zucchini.
- Please see *Vegetables and Fruit* (p.36) for more information.

Protein Foods

Q: What is the reason for recommending plain unsweetened yogurt? Can flavored yogurt still be served?

- Canada’s Food Guide recommends selecting products that are lower in sugar, including plain unsweetened yogurt. Many flavoured yogurts are high in sugar (%DV > 15%). Providers may choose to serve sweetened yogurt with <15% DV for sugar, however it is expected that they will move towards offering plain yogurt over time. This can be a gradual shift to support children to adjust to the unsweetened taste (i.e., mixing plain unsweetened yogurt with sweetened yogurt with <15% DV for sugar).
- Providers can also add foods to plain yogurt to create a complete snack or meal and add flavour. Examples include adding fruit (fresh, frozen or unsweetened canned) and/or whole grain cereal or granola that meets the %DV criteria for whole grain foods.

Q: Can plant-based meat substitutes (i.e., veggie ground round and veggie burgers) be offered?

- Yes, these products may be offered if they meet the %DV criteria for protein foods.
- It is recommended to offer minimally processed plant-based proteins when possible, such as plain tofu, beans, and lentils etc.

Q: In recipes can a combination of protein foods be used?

- Yes, a combination of protein foods can be used. Protein foods should be approximately ¼ of the ingredients in the recipe (p. 40). For example, some recipes may include a combination of meat and plant-based proteins, or meat and cheese/milk.
- Including a variety of iron-rich protein sources (i.e., meat, fish, poultry, eggs, tofu and legumes) on menus is important for young children.
- , and yogurt are lower in iron compared to other protein foods, but could be combined with other proteins as long as the recommended frequencies for serving cheese and yogurt are maintained (i.e., Cheese and yogurt may each be offered a maximum of once per day (including both meals and snacks). Cheese and yogurt are offered as the ONLY protein food at the noon meal a maximum of once per week.

Q: Are green peas and green beans considered protein foods?

- No, green peas and green beans are vegetables in the ELCC Food and Beverage Criteria.
- Although green peas contain some protein, both green peas and green beans are more nutritionally similar to other green vegetables.
- Examples of “peas” that are considered protein foods include split peas, black-eyed peas, pigeon peas, and chickpeas.
- Examples of “beans” that are considered protein foods include kidney beans, pinto beans, white beans, black beans, lima beans, fava beans, and soy beans (edamame).

Whole Grain Foods

Q: Can a grain food be offered if it is made with “whole wheat flour” or “enriched wheat flour” and meets all %DV criteria?

- Products made with whole wheat can only be offered when a whole grain option is unavailable.
- Look for products with “whole grain wheat” or other whole grains as the first ingredient on the ingredient list.

- When whole grain options are unavailable, choose products made with whole wheat flour over enriched wheat flour or white flour.
- For example, if a whole grain hamburger bun is unavailable, a whole wheat hamburger bun would be the next best option.
- Please see ***Whole Grain Foods*** (p. 38) for more information.

Q: Are “multigrain” foods whole grain?

- “Multigrain” foods may not be whole grain. Multigrain means it contains more than one type of grain.
- Check the ingredient list for terms like 100% whole grain wheat, oats or brown rice. For example, 100% whole grain multigrain bread or whole grain multigrain crackers.

Q: Can granola bars be offered?

- Yes, granola bars that do not contain chocolate chips or marshmallows, do not have a chocolate or yogurt coating, and meet the %DV criteria for whole grain foods can be offered.
- This has been clarified in [the manual](#).

Fats and Oils

Q: Why is soft margarine included in the list of healthy fats/oils?

- Soft margarine is primarily made from vegetable oils such as canola and soybean, which contain unsaturated fats.
- Replacing saturated fats (i.e., butter, coconut oil) with unsaturated fats is recommended to support healthy growth and development in young children and lower risk factors for heart disease and stroke.
- Please see ***Fats and Oils*** (p. 43) for more information.

Q: Why is coconut oil included in the list of fats to limit?

- Coconut oil is high in saturated fat.
- Replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats (i.e., vegetable oils like olive or canola) is recommended to support healthy growth and development in young children and lower risk factors for heart disease and stroke.
- It is important to note that coconut oil (and other similar oils like palm oil) are important ingredients for some cultures and may be used in the preparation of dishes that are culturally relevant or part of appropriate learning activities.

Beverages

Q: Why is it still recommended to serve cow’s milk?

- Serving cow’s milk, alongside water, is recommended for this age group.
- Children in this age group may not get enough vitamin D and calcium and cow’s milk is a familiar and accessible source of these important nutrients for bone health.
- For children over 2 years of age who do not consume cow’s milk, plain, fortified soy beverage is a suitable alternative. See ***Beverages*** (p. 42) in Food and Beverage Criteria for more information.

Q: Can cow's milk or soy milk be served as the only protein food at meals and snacks?

- No, it is not recommended to serve cow's milk or soy milk as the only protein food at noon meal or snacks.
- Cow's milk and soy milk are lower in iron, an important nutrient for young children, and when served too often can displace other iron-rich protein foods in the dietary pattern.
- Including a variety of iron-rich protein sources (i.e., meat, fish, poultry, eggs, tofu and legumes) on menus is important for young children.
- Plain, unsweetened cow's milk and soy milk are nutritious beverage choices and should be served daily as a beverage at noon meal along with other protein foods. It is optional to offer cow's milk or soy milk as a beverage at snacks.

Q: Why is it not recommended to offer soy milk and other plant-based beverages to children under 2?

- Plant-based beverages such as soy, oat, almond, rice and coconut beverages are not recommended as a main milk source for children under 2 years of age as they do not provide the same kind of nourishment that full fat cow milk or goat milk does. Plant-based beverages are lower in fat, calories, protein and other nutrients important for growth and development.
- If parents/guardians request that their child be offered these beverages under the age of 2, this can be discussed and communicated via the diverse feeding plan and the parent/guardian may be asked to bring the beverage from home.
- After 2 years of age, a plain unsweetened fortified plant-based beverage can be offered. Fortified soy beverage is recommended since it meets the protein, energy, calcium and vitamin D needs of children this age.

Special Dietary Considerations

Q: If a family requests an alternative food for medical, religious or cultural reasons, do these foods need to align with the Food and Beverage Criteria?

- No, foods brought from home for the above reasons do not need to meet the Food and Beverage criteria.
- If a family requests a food or beverage that is not part of the regular menu, the family may be asked to supply this.
- Use the ***Diverse Feeding Plan*** (p. 64) to communicate with the family around foods brought from home.

Q: If a family needs to send specific foods for their child, would I have them fill out the diverse feeding plan?

The diverse feeding plan can be a great tool for any situation where a child's food needs call for adjustments to the general eating environment. Completing this together is a great way to start a dialogue with the family. The diverse feeding plan should be documented both in the child's file and in their learning environment. If you'd like further support with this process, please contact your Early Childhood Development Consultant.

Miscellaneous

Q: Can we serve products with food dyes or additives?

- Food dyes and additives are safe as they are carefully assessed for any effects on human health before being approved for use.
- While food additives are safe and have an important function in the food supply, the Food and Beverage Criteria promotes consumption of whole foods that are minimally processed and contain little to no food additives.
- The following food additives are named specifically in the ***Food and Beverage Criteria*** (p. 32) and foods containing these additives should not be served to young children:
 - Caffeine, and
 - Sugar substitutes such as aspartame, erythritol, isomalt, lactitol, maltitol and maltitol syrup, mannitol, saccharin, sorbitol and sorbitol syrup, stevia extract and steviol glycosides, xylitol, sucralose, and acesulfame potassium.

Q: Can ingredients such as flour and cornstarch be used to make materials for sensory play (e.g., playdough)?

- Yes, ingredients such as flour, cornstarch, vinegar, baking soda etc. are acceptable to use for sensory play materials such as playdough and goop.
- The intention of Standard 7.2.6 is to limit the use of whole food items (such as dried pasta, rice, and beans) for play to reduce food waste and be sensitive to families that may be experiencing food insecurity.
- Some examples of incorporating food scraps or food waste into exploration of textures or exposure to different kinds of food:
 - Paint stamping with cantaloupe skins
 - Using orange peels to make essential oils for playdough
 - Exploring the inside materials of melons, pumpkins, etc.