

# 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](http://csacoalition.org).



### Engage parents in dialogue

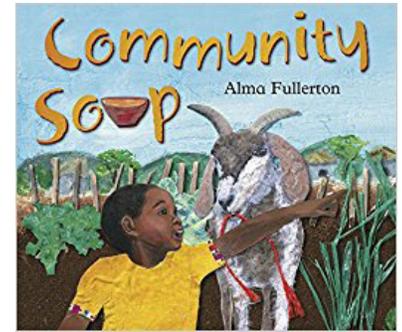
- Ask your families if there are holidays or other food traditions that they would like to be incorporated into the program's celebrations.
- Ask parents for recipe ideas to be included in the cycle menu of the program. For more inspiration and resources, read about [Massachusetts's efforts to incorporate 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!

**Beth Hanna**, Farm to School Director, [beth@communitygroundworks.org](mailto:beth@communitygroundworks.org)

**Jill Groendyk**, Farm to ECE Trainer, [jill@communitygroundworks.org](mailto:jill@communitygroundworks.org)

**Deb Moses**, Farm to ECE Trainer, [deb@communitygroundworks.org](mailto:deb@communitygroundworks.org)

P: 608-310-8844

*Thanks to the Policy Equity Group and Supporting Families Together Association for their review of this piece.*

*This project is funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan.*

