



Credit: Growing Gardens

GETTING STARTED WITH FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

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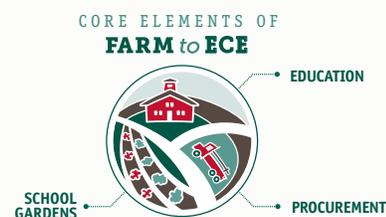
NATIONAL
FARM to SCHOOL
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GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing, school gardens and food and agriculture education into school systems and early and education settings.

What is farm to early care and education?

Farm to early care and education is a set of strategies and activities that offer increased access to healthy, local foods through local procurement, gardening opportunities, and food and agriculture education activities to enhance the quality of educational experience. These same core elements as farm to school adapt well to all types of early care and education settings (e.g., preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, programs in K-12 school districts). In addition to promoting health, wellness, and high quality educational opportunities, farm to early care and education also expands healthy food access, encourages family and community engagement, provides additional market opportunities for farmers, and supports thriving communities.



Getting started

Farm to early care and education offers multiple strategies to improve the health of children, increase the quality of educational experiences, and promote valuable family engagement opportunities, aligning with goals of the early care and education community. This list provides easy first steps to develop a lasting initiative in your community:

- 1 Assess where you are and where you'd like to be.** Are your goals centered on:
 - Purchasing healthy, local foods to be served in meals or snacks?
 - Establishing a garden or offering gardening experiences?
 - Enhancing the learning environment with other food and agriculture related activities (e.g., field trips to farms or farmers markets, cooking lessons, etc.)?
 - Engaging families in local food access and education?
 - All of the above?
- 2 Form a team and collaborate.** Educators and administrators, parents, Child Care Resource and Referral staff, local farmers and producers, community organizations, and even local colleges/universities can play important roles in supporting farm to early care and education activities.
- 3 Establish one or two attainable goals to get started.** Some ideas include:
 - Identify snack or meal items that you would like to transition to local.
 - Find a farmer, farmers market, grocery store, or wholesaler to connect you to local foods. Search LocalHarvest (localharvest.org) or reach out to the National Farm to School Network for help making these connections.
 - Identify curricula, activities or books related to gardens, preparing and eating healthy, local foods or learning about where food comes from and how it grows.
 - Plan a local foods meal, snack, day, or special event.
 - Reach out to a local nursery or hardware store for donations or other support for starting an edible garden.
 - Plan a farm or farmers market field trip, a farmer or chef visit to the classroom, or host a tasting of local produce.

WHY FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION?

KIDS WIN

Farm to early care and education provides all children access to nutritious, high quality, local food so they are ready to learn and grow. Farm to early care and education activities enhance classroom education through hands-on learning related to food, health, agriculture and nutrition.

FARMERS WIN

Farm to early care and education can offer new financial opportunities for farmers, fishers, ranchers, food processors and food manufacturers by opening the doors to an institutional market worth billions of dollars.

COMMUNITIES WIN

Buying from local producers and processors reduces the carbon footprint of food transportation while stimulating the local economy. Educational activities such as school gardens and composting programs help to create a healthy environment around the community.

The National Farm to School Network has a wide variety of resources and information about farm to school in early care and education. For more information visit farmtoschool.org/ECE.

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4 Learn from others. If you are running into an obstacle, it is likely that there is someone who has run into it before! Some places to connect and learn from others include:

- The **National Farm to School Network** website (farmtoschool.org). Find resources and contact information for people in your state and region who are working on farm to school and farm to early care and education. Sign up for our e-newsletter to receive regular communication about news, resources and opportunities. Search our resource database for tools and materials to support every facet of farm to early care and education.
- Your county or state's **Child Care Resource and Referral agency**. These agencies can provide resources and ways to learn about and connect with other early care and education programs and sites that are implementing farm to early care and education activities. Find your local agencies at www.usa.childcareaware.org.
- The **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** staff in your state. Learn how CACFP can help you make local food more economical and can free up resources for other farm to early care and education activities. CACFP state agency contacts can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp.

5 Promote farm to early care and education in your community. Ideas include sharing information and recipes in parent newsletters, posting garden or field trip photos to a website or on social media, or inviting local media to your activities.

Opportunities in early care and education settings

A few key characteristics of early care and education settings make them ideal for local food procurement, gardening, and food and agriculture education:

Local foods procurement: Early care and education programs tend to purchase at smaller volumes and generally do not offer a la carte choices or multiple meal options. Small purchasing volumes can be a good fit for small farmers who may not have enough volume to work with an entire school district.

Curriculum: Experiential education is highly encouraged in early care and education settings. This is a great fit with many farm to early care and education activities such as gardening, cooking, and taste tests. Farm to early care and education activities align well with existing early care and education curricula and support achievement of early learning standards.

Family involvement: Family involvement tends to be strong during the early childhood years, which can be a huge asset for farm to early care and education programming. Families can engage in farm to early care and education activities in the early care and education setting and children take home what they learn, influencing family food choices in the home.

FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN EVERY SETTING

Farm to early care and education adapts to all kinds of settings. Here are two examples:

Family child care as the perfect platform for experiential education

Family child care providers across the country are providing valuable hands-on education opportunities to children through backyard gardens, cooking activities, farm field trips and more. Farm to early care and education is a great fit for family child care because activities can adapt to all the different age groups and abilities that may be served in one family child care setting.



Farm to early care and education supports Head Start success

Head Start offers vital, high quality early care and education opportunities to low-income families across the country. Farm to early care and education offers benefits that align with Head Start priority areas, including an emphasis on experiential learning, family and community engagement, and life-long health and wellness for children, families and caregivers.