



CHILD AND ADULT CARE  
FOOD PROGRAM

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## MEAL APPEAL TOOLKIT



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**Disclaimer:**  
The purpose of the Meal Appeal Toolkit is to give providers facts and tips to prepare meals that are readily enjoyed by children in the CACFP. When children understand the reasons behind their food choices it helps create calmer mealtimes. This toolkit is targeted for CACFP providers and is not an extensive program operations resource. Sponsors and contracting entities are responsible for knowing and understanding all handbooks, manuals, alerts, notices, and guidance, as well as any other forms of communication that provide further guidance, clarification or instruction on operating the program.





# 1

## MENU PLANNING

### CACFP MENU PLANNING INCLUDES MANY FACTORS:

- Federal compliance requirements
- Budget
- Equipment and personnel
- Child acceptance
- Supply and access to food

Food presentation is important because children “eat with their eyes” first. Meals that look good, taste good. When preparing meals, consider including variety and balance in the following:

- Shapes: round, square, rectangular, wedge
- Tastes: sweet, sour, tart, salty, spicy
- Textures: soft, fluffy, crunchy, crisp, creamy, smooth
- Colors: yellow, orange, red, green, purple, white, tan/brown

### MENU PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS:

- Inventory of what is already on hand
- New foods alongside familiar foods
- Cost of food and cost of labor
- Kitchen equipment
- Staff skill level to make the meals
- Results of taste test with the children
- Culture and preferences of the children
- Diverse representation in photographs and sample menus

Cycle menus are menus that are repeated over a period of time, typically every 2-4 weeks. Cycle menus offer many advantages, including:

- Saving time
- Allowing more flexibility
- Increasing quality standards with familiar recipes
- Streamlining planned numbers and procurement
- Making grocery shopping quick and allowing time to shop for deals



## STEPS FOR PLANNING A MENU CYCLE

1. Collect a list of children's favorite menu items, existing inventory, and available items to order. Organize the list in a table or Excel spreadsheet according to food component and then if possible, by sub-category.
2. List all the meat/meat alternates available and then put those items under chicken, beef, pork, fish, meat alternate, etc. Do the same for vegetables, fruit, and grains. For vegetables and fruit, you may want to break down to canned, frozen, and fresh sub-categories.
3. Take note if a food component has fewer items than other components and consider adding new items to the shorter list.
4. If there are too many items under a sub-category such as having too many chicken entrees, decide if you could add a different meat alternate to add variety.
5. Each cycle for breakfast, lunch, or snack may be a different number of weeks based on the number of quality and nutritious offerings you are able to offer. For example, you might have a 6-week lunch or supper cycle, a 3-week breakfast cycle, a 2-week snack cycle, and a 1-week vegetable/fruit cycle ensuring that you do not repeat a vegetable or fruit within a cycle week.





See the resource section for a menu template and examples of food items to get you started

## START WITH LUNCH

1. Plan entrées based on assigned proteins using recipes that consider children's favorites and inventory. Often the meat/meat alternate is part of a combination food and will include other food components.
2. Pair vegetables with specific entrées. Use a variety of different colors to contrast the entrées.
3. Choose fruits based on texture, color and shape. Fruit juice is allowed, but it can only be served once per day.
4. Add condiments to your menu.
5. List milk choices.

## MOVE TO BREAKFAST

1. Plan main items, which can be the grain but also remember a meat/meat alternate can replace grains up to three times a week to add variety: scrambled eggs, sausage patty, yogurt parfait.
2. Add a fruit, two different fruits, or a fruit and vegetable to meet the minimum requirement. Check that the fruit is different from the fruit served during lunch.
3. Add any condiments.
4. List milk choices.

## THEN PLAN SNACK

1. List vegetables and fruits that have not been used. Consider leftovers from a lunch earlier in the week such as zucchini and provide a ranch dip and pair it with crackers.
2. Be careful not to repeat any items that have been included in breakfast or lunch the same day.

## TIPS FOR MENU PLANNING

- Evaluate colors, textures and flavor balances.
- Use fruits and vegetables to add color. Avoid meals that are all brown or yellow. Color variety makes menu items stand out and gives the impression of freshness.
- Different shapes can make food items stand out. Fun shapes can create intrigue and interest. Use cookie cutters to offer fruit shaped like stars, flowers, animals or seasonal characters. Serve multiple fruits such as round cherries added to cut pineapple for contrast.
- Review the menu for flavor balance and complementary tastes. Heavy entrees are best paired with lighter, fresh sides. Salad pairs well with a cheesy pizza entrée. Make sure entrees and vegetable combinations work well together.
  - If serving scrambled eggs for breakfast, pair with okra, tomatoes, asparagus, spinach, bell peppers, and/or green beans. Use a minimum of 1/8 cup of each vegetable for it to count.
- Boost food flavors with seasonings, dips, salsas, or purees and allow children to choose.



SEE THE RESOURCE  
SECTION FOR TIPS ON HOW  
TO SUCCESSFULLY COOK  
WITH WHOLE GRAINS.

- Offer variety with seasonal menus.
- Ensure that one grain across all meals and snacks served is whole grain-rich.
- Plan promotional days each month. Replace your normal cycle day with a special menu or call it a themed meal such as Italian-Inspired Day, Breakfast for Lunch Day, Soup Day, Sandwich Day, Pasta Day, Salad Day, etc.
- Consider speed-scratch cooking which incorporates value-added food products with additional ingredients and minimizes production steps. For example: add a pre-made sauce to a protein of your choice, add toppings to a frozen cheese pizza, fold in garlic or a vegetable to instant mashed potatoes, purchase pulled pork then add your sauce for tacos.
- Consider how much equipment is required to make the meals. Avoid a lunch menu where all food components need to be baked if only one oven is available.
- Brainstorm enough vegetables/fruits to have a different one each day of the week for each meal type. For example, if the menu includes breakfast, lunch and snack, you will need at least 12 vegetables/fruit per week for breakfast and lunch and a few more to include in snack a few times a week or daily.



### BUDGETING THE MENU

- Pair higher cost entrees with lower cost vegetables/fruits to balance food cost.
- Mix frozen blueberries with frozen strawberries to meet the fruit requirement and offset the higher cost of blueberries.
- Consider turkey or chicken when shopping. Beef is often higher priced.
- Purchase fruit that is in season. In Texas, serve grapefruits in the winter, serve apples in the fall.
- Make half the meat requirement a pork roast or other meat and the other half a meat alternate like kidney beans to offset the cost while still meeting minimum requirements.
- Look at times during the week/month when there is more down time and use recipes that require more preparation and finishing time. This will give staff time to adapt to different tasks and develop more effective habits in the kitchen.

### ASSESS YOUR MENU

- Does the lunch entrée vary day to day? For example, did you serve chicken two days in a row?
- Is a variety of fruits and vegetables offered for all meals for the week?
- How do the textures of the food components compare to one another?
- Are there a variety of flavors such as mild, strong, sweet, sour or salty?
- Is the snack like the other meals in the day?
- Are there different forms of the same fruit? Juice, puree, whole, frozen, canned?
- Is there a variety of vegetable subgroups?
- Is there a variety of color at each meal?
- Is there variety between the entrée and other food components cost-wise?
- Is there enough labor for production? Is each food component too labor intensive?
- Consider meals served on Mondays and Fridays: Do you want it to be a warm, nutrient dense meal for the children to go home with or provide ready-to-eat cereal because attendance is low?
- Think about whether the children want a variety, or do they appreciate consistency week to week?
- Are the foods age-appropriate and address choking hazard prevention?



SEE THE RESOURCE SECTION FOR  
A MENU PLANNING TEMPLATE.

## EXAMPLES OF ENTRÉE/VEGETABLE/FRUIT PAIRINGS



### TACO DAY

Fish Tacos | Tomato | Lettuce | Salsa | Pears

### ITALIAN INSPIRED DAY

Whole Wheat Pasta with Meatballs | Zucchini | Mixed Berries

### BREAKFAST FOR LUNCH DAY

French Toast | Scrambled Eggs with Veggies | Fruit Salad

### ASIAN INSPIRED DAY

Teriyaki Chicken | Vegetable Stir Fry | Brown Rice | Oranges

### MEATLESS DAY

Black Bean Quesadilla | Cucumbers | Apple Slices

### MEXICAN FIESTA DAY

Turkey Enchiladas | Sugar Snap Peas | Corn

### PIZZA DAY

Chicken Pizza | Green Beans | Banana

### FISH DAY

Baked Fish Fillet | Brown Rice | Beets | Peaches

### BBQ DAY

BBQ Pork on a Bun | Garden Green Salad | Tropical Fruit

### BURGER DAY

Beef Patty on WW Bun | Tater Tots | Baked Beans

### PASTA DAY

Mac and Cheese | Asparagus | Blueberries

### SOUP DAY

Chicken Noodle Soup | Yogurt | Carrots | Cup of Grapes

### SALAD DAY

Chicken Salad with Bun | Broccoli | Cantaloupe

### CHILI DAY

Beef and Bean Chili | Cornbread | Pineapple

### SANDWICH DAY

Grilled Ham and Cheese | Tomatoes | Watermelon

### CASSEROLE DAY

Chicken and Rice with Vegetable Medley | Mandarin Oranges





## EMBRACE CULTURAL TRADITIONS THROUGH THE FOODS SERVED

### HOW TO START:

- Know where to find supportive resources.
- Get to know your families and community.
- Look at local restaurants' menus for inspiration.
- Review your menus and assess where change can occur.
- Ensure compliance with CACFP credibility and standardization.

## 2 CULTURAL FOOD

### NEWLY CREDITABLE ITEMS INCLUDE:

- Tofu
- Tempeh
- Coconut
- Hominy
- Corn flour/corn meal/masa
- Surimi seafood
- Noodles made from vegetables

### KNIFE SKILLS

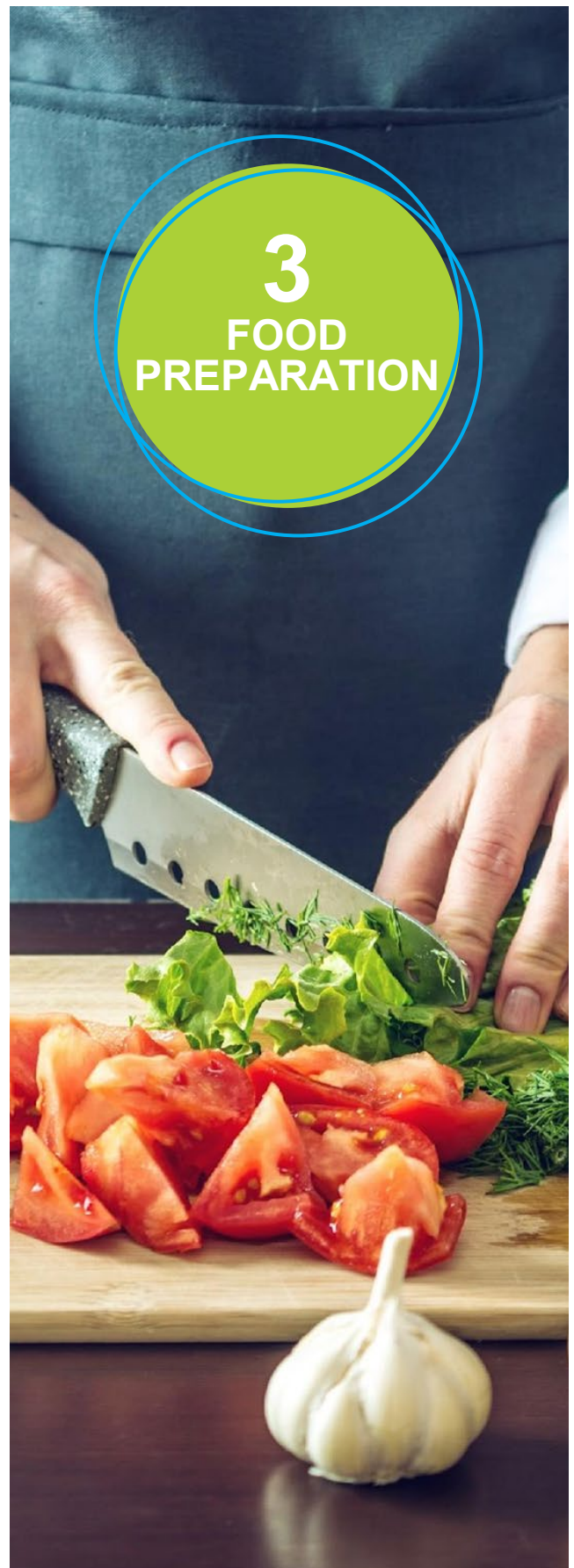
*How fruits and vegetables are cut can determine if children will choose the item. Consider the following recommendations:*

- Instead of slicing oranges in half along the core vein, cut them into quarters across the core vein.
- Uniform vegetable pieces will have consistent texture when cooked, especially when baking harder vegetables such as squash, potatoes or carrots.
- Cutting foods down to the appropriate size will make the food look more approachable to children's small mouths. For example, cut sandwiches into quarters, slice celery thinly lengthwise.

### TEXTURES

*Texture plays a significant role in the taste experience of food, so it is important to preserve the texture of menu items. Use these tips to avoid overly hard or mushy textures.*

- Allow flexibility to serve fruits when ripe. For example, bananas ripen quickly so allow service flexibility based on color when delivered.
- Serve fruits at different temperatures. For example, frozen fruits may become too mushy when thawed so serve with ice crystals to keep their shape, such as strawberries.
- Fruits prepared with just-in-time service ensures freshness, as well as reduces the browning effect of oxidation. Another way to prevent browning is to toss cut fruits with a vitamin C-rich fruit juice (such as lemon, orange, or pineapple juice).







### COOK TIME

*Prepare food items using just-in-time service meaning food items are prepared as close to service time as labor allows.*

- Ensure temperature control of vegetables. Vegetables held hot for too long can begin to dull in color.
- Calibrate oven temperatures to ensure that foods are cooked and browned, glazed or crisped properly. Check with your oven manufacturer for calibration steps.
- Try different culinary techniques with vegetables. Different vegetables require different cook times, and you can offer variety by using different cooking methods such as baking, roasting, sauteing and boiling. Follow directions or the recipe for correct cook time and temperature.

Taste testing is a great way to introduce children to new or unusual foods. One small sample-sized portion is less intimidating than an entire serving of an unfamiliar food. Children respond favorably to repeat exposures of new foods as they are more likely to try new recipes if they are familiar with the foods being offered.

#### BENEFITS OF TASTE TESTING MENU ITEMS

- Raises awareness about healthy foods
- Involves the community
- Builds a culture of trying new foods
- Encourages children to try new foods with multiple exposures
- Integrates nutrition education into taste tests

## 4 TASTE TESTING





# 5

## CHOKING HAZARDS

Young children, especially those under four years old, are still learning how to chew properly. Review your menu for choking hazards. If you are in doubt, cut the food item to less than a half inch in diameter and avoid serving foods that are as wide as a nickel. Always supervise children during mealtime ensuring that they are seated upright and not allowed to run/walk until they are finished. Encourage children to eat slowly and talk only if they are not chewing. Here are some ways to reduce the risk of choking by changing the food's shape, size, and texture before serving:

- Cook foods until soft enough to pierce easily with a fork and mash or puree if appropriate
- Cut soft food into thin slices or small pieces no larger than a half inch
- Cut soft, round foods into short strips





**THE FOLLOWING FOODS CAN BE A CHOKING HAZARD FOR CHILDREN UNDER FOUR YEARS OF AGE IF SERVED WHOLE OR IN CHUNKS**

CHOKING HAZARD	MAKE IT SAFER BY
Nuts and seeds	Chopping finely; serving chopped or ground in prepared foods
Hot dogs	Cutting in quarters lengthwise, then cut into smaller pieces
Fish, chicken, meat	Remove all bones before cooking
Whole grapes, cherries, melon balls	Cutting in half lengthwise and again
Fruits with pits/seeds	Remove seeds and pits, cut into smaller pieces
Raisins	Cooking in food
Chunks of meat	Chopping finely, grate, ground, thinly slice
Cheese	Chopping finely, grate, thinly slice
Hard fruit chunks (ex: apples, melon)	Chopping finely, cutting into thin strips, steaming, mashing, or pureeing
Raw vegetables	Chopping finely, cutting into thin strips, steaming, mashing, or pureeing
Carrots and celery	Steaming slightly then cut into sticks
Nut butters	Spread thinly on crackers or bread or dilute by adding applesauce
Nut butters	Use creamy and not chunky spreads
Dried fruits or vegetables	Do not serve
Popcorn	Do not serve



Food allergies are abnormal responses from the body's immune system to food. An allergic reaction can happen within seconds or a few hours of eating, and if precautions are not made, some reactions can be fatal. The top eight food allergens are milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, soybeans, and wheat. Sometimes, food allergens can be found in nonfood items too, such as: soaps, dried pasta for activities, crayons, finger paints and modeling clay.

Key symptoms include:

- Itching in the mouth and throat
- Skin rashes or eczema
- Swelling of tongue or throat
- Difficulty breathing
- Cramps, nausea, diarrhea, and/or vomiting
- Decline in blood pressure
- Loss of consciousness

Food intolerance is a food-induced reaction that does not involve the body's immune system, and it is usually not life-threatening. Lactose intolerance is a common food intolerance. Typical symptoms include:

- Passing gas
- Feeling bloated
- Abdominal pain

## TIPS TO ADDRESS FOOD ALLERGIES

*Create a food allergy policy for your facility that will outline procedures for food allergies and should include:*

- State and federal disability laws regarding children with allergies.
- Responsibilities and expectations for every caregiver including what to discuss with the parents and the accommodations that are reasonable for the child.
- Specific information needed from the medical authority and the medical statement.
- Steps to take in case of an emergency including the child's name, allergy, symptoms, and treatment and emergency contact.
- All identifying medical information should be covered with a coversheet to protect the child's privacy.





## 7 SUCCESSFUL MEALTIME

### TIMING

*Always look at the needs of children and the hours of operation when creating a meal schedule. Keep in mind the following:*

- Two hours must elapse between the end of a meal and/or snack and start of another. The duration of meal service must not exceed two hours.
- The duration of snack service must not exceed one hour.
- Stick to the regularly scheduled mealtimes. If a child is not eating and they have been encouraged to try, do not force them to eat. Remind them of the next meal/snack time and that they will not receive food before then.

### TRANSITION ACTIVITY

*Transition activities are small activities between two major activities used to help make the routines run smoothly.*

- It could be a song, a saying, or a game to end an activity and start mealtime activities. Example: Tell the children, “We will have lunch in a few minutes, but first we are going to wash our hands, and then we will sit down at the table.”
- Children tend to respond better when they know and understand what will happen next, remind them of mealtime expectations.

### FAMILIARIZATION

*Repeatedly offer healthy foods such as vegetables to young children.*

- Start small. Introduce new foods on the child’s plate. Encourage them to touch, smell and describe the food item. Do not pressure them to taste the food.
- Pair a new food with familiar flavors. Sometimes offering new foods, like vegetables, with well-liked dips or dressings or seasoning them in a familiar way can encourage children to try new foods and help with acceptance.



## LEARNING BY OBSERVATION

*Young children naturally want to follow the actions and behaviors of the adults in their lives. Children learn which foods to eat and which to reject by watching others. Children will be more inclined to taste an unfamiliar food if a trusted adult is eating it also. Use the following tips to help model healthy habits:*

- Make positive comments about the foods provided. Ask children what they think about the foods tried “Is it thumbs up, thumbs down or in between?” and honor their answers.
- Be willing to try new foods with the children. Compare experiences and talk about how the food looks, smells and tastes. Discuss where the foods come from and why they are healthy.
- Allow enough time so that meals and snacks are unhurried and positive activities. Children should learn to chew their food completely. Modeling these behaviors teaches children mealtime behavior and reduces the likelihood of choking.
- Allow children to role model for their peers. Seat adventurous eaters next to more cautious eaters to motivate them to try different foods.

## DO NOT:

- Pressure children to eat.
- Use food as a reward or to soothe emotions. Instead use non-food rewards.
- Be very strict about what children eat.
- Reward, bribe or punish fussy eaters.
- Pressure kids to finish everything on their plate at mealtimes. Instead, help them identify and listen to their hunger or fullness cues by talking to them about how their stomach feels before, during and after eating.





## WHAT

Family style meal service is an optional type of meal service that allows children and adults to serve themselves food from shared platters, bowls, and pitchers. During this time, it can encourage a pleasant eating environment that supports mealtime as a learning experience.

## HOW

Place all required meal components of a reimbursable meal on the table at the same time. All food components should have the minimum required amounts for the children at the table and are served in common serving dishes. Caregivers encourage children to take the minimum required portion of each food component; however, if a child is hesitant, the caregiver will encourage them to try a small portion/bite. If the child declines the food the caregiver will not force the child to take the food item. A child's meal may be claimed for reimbursement even if s/he declines to select one or more offered food items.

## WHO

Children are allowed to choose the food items they want in the amount they want; caregivers will also role model serving themselves the same food components.

## WHY

Presenting meals as family style allows children to self-regulate and understand hunger signals while increasing a child's development of motor skills, dexterity, and hand strength as they learn to serve themselves food and beverages from shared bowls and pitchers with adult supervision.

# 8

## FAMILY STYLE MEAL SERVICE







Children learn social skills through mealtime conversation. They learn to take turns, practice sharing, how to use utensils, how to set and clear the table, learn about portion sizes, and recognize when they are hungry and full. As they learn these skills, they learn to cooperate, converse and be more independent.

#### TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL FAMILY STYLE MEAL SERVICE

- Start with the right equipment by choosing child-friendly items for children to use and make self-service easier.
- Take note of each child's skill level in choosing foods for family style meal service. Be ready to assist. Portions served to the child must be at least the minimum serving size.
- Give each child a task to help set up for mealtime.
- If family style meal service is a new concept, try a combination of pre-plated and family style meal services. For example, serve the minimum portion sizes for hot soup or chili and milk then allow children to serve themselves cornbread and strawberries.
- Mealtime conversations around food may include what foods are being offered, the colors of each food offered, how they are prepared, if the children eat similar foods at home, the origins of the food, or a variety of other related topics.

# 9 RESOURCES

## EXAMPLES OF FOOD ITEMS

### FRUITS CAN BE FRESH, FROZEN, CANNED, OR DRIED

Apricots	Mangoes
Blackberries	Nectarines
Cantaloupe	Papaya
Cherries	Persimmons
Cranberries	Pineapple
Currants	Plums
Dates	Pomegranate
Figs	Prunes
Fruit Cocktail	Raspberries
Grapefruit	Star Fruit
Guava	Kiwi
Honeydew	Tangerine

### VEGETABLES CAN BE FRESH, FROZEN, OR CANNED

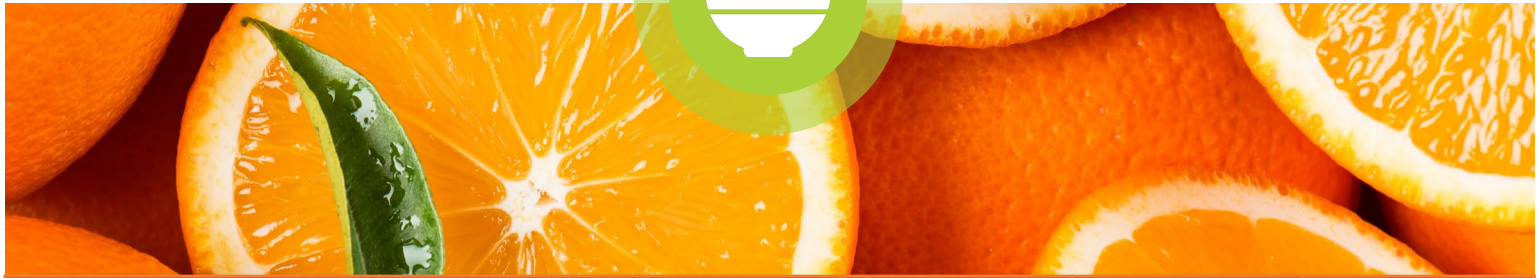
Artichoke	Leeks
Arugula	Mushrooms
Asparagus	Mustard Greens
Avocado	Okra
Beets	Pumpkin
Bell Peppers	Radishes
Bok Choy	Red Cabbage
Brussels Sprouts	Romaine Lettuce
Butternut Squash	Snow Peas
Cassava	Sweet Potatoes
Cauliflower	Swiss Chard
Collard Greens	Tomatillos
Eggplant	Turnip Greens
Green Beans	Turnips
Green Peppers	100% Vegetable Juice
Jicama	Wax Beans
Kale	





## EXAMPLES OF FOOD ITEMS

EXAMPLES OF LEGUMES AND PEAS	EXAMPLES OF MEATS / MEAT ALTERNATES
Black Beans	Almond Butter
Black Eyed Peas	Bison
Chickpeas / Garbanzo Beans	Cashews
Edamame	White Fish
Falafel	Cottage Cheese
Fava Beans	Crab
Hummus	Eggs
Kidney Beans	Soybeans
Lentils	Sunflower Butter
Lima Beans	Sunflower Seeds
Navy Beans	Surimi
Pink Beans	Tempeh
Pinto Beans	Tofu
Soybeans	Pumpkin Seeds
Split Peas	Salmon
White Beans	Shrimp



	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5
<b>BREAKFAST</b>					
Grain / MMA					
Fruit / Vegetable					
Milk					
<b>LUNCH</b>					
Meat / Meat Alternate					
Grain					
Vegetable					
Fruit / 2 <sup>nd</sup> Veg					
Milk					
<b>PM SNACK</b> Select 2 components: Grain, MMA, Vegetable, Fruit, Milk					
Component 1					
Component 2					



## USDA'S WEBPAGE ON CULTURE AND FOOD

<https://www.nutrition.gov/topics/shopping-cooking-and-meal-planning/culture-and-food>

## PORTION SIZES FOR AGE GROUPS

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/meal-pattern-posters-cacfp>

Cooking with Whole Grains: Here are resources for recommended cook times and best practices when preparing whole grain-rich pasta.

- **Whole Grain-Rich Pasta, Gold Standards for Cook Times**
- **Whole Grain-Rich Pasta, Best Practices to Cook on the Stovetop and in a Tilt Skillet**
- **Whole Grain-Rich Pasta, Best Practices to Cook in a Steamer and in an Oven**
- **Tips to Prepare Whole Grain-Rich Items**

## DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Ellyn Satter is an internationally recognized authority on eating and feeding in childhood. Caregivers provide structure, support, and opportunities. Children choose how much and whether to eat from what the parents provide.

CAREGIVERS' RESPONSIBILITY	CHILDREN'S RESPONSIBILITY
Choose and prepare the food	Children will eat or not eat
Provide meals and snacks	Children will eat the amount they need
Make eating times pleasant	Children will grow predictably
Model positive eating behavior	Children will learn to behave well at the table

The Institute of Child Nutrition website contains videos, resources and trainings on menu planning: [www.theicn.org/cicn](http://www.theicn.org/cicn)

**"Happy Mealtimes for Healthy Kids"** includes tips to reduce stress and struggles during meal and snack times:  
<http://www.texaschildfoodprogram.org/assets/happymealtimes.pdf>

**Family Style Dining Guide:** This guide found on SquareMeals under Meal Appeal Resources provides details on how to successfully implement family style meal service.





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*U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410;*

*fax: (202) 690-7442; or email: **program.intake@usda.gov**.*

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Food and Nutrition Division  
Child and Adult Care Food Program



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
**COMMISSIONER SID MILLER**

Fraud Hotline: 1-866-5-FRAUD-4 or 1-866-537-2834 | P.O. Box 12847 | Austin, TX 78711  
Toll Free: (877) TEX-MEAL | For the hearing impaired: (800) 735-2989 (TTY)

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[www.SquareMeals.org](http://www.SquareMeals.org)