

# Building Relationships with Families

Families face many different challenges, including busy schedules, difficult financial situations and limited help and support. As a child care provider, it's important that you build a relationship with families. This will help you to better understand their circumstances and provide the best possible nutritional care for their children.

When you work with families, you have an opportunity to:

- encourage healthy eating in their homes
- provide children with positive messages about nutrition and their eating environment
- learn from each other, so you can best meet the needs of the children under your care

Here are some ways to strengthen, and build on, relationships with families:

## Learn about families' needs

- Ask families about their children's food preferences, and whether there are foods they must not eat due to allergies, or medical conditions (ex: celiac disease or diabetes).
- Learn about families' cultural and religious practices that concern food (ex: food restrictions, mealtime customs/rituals, recipes for their favorite family dishes).

- Use the list of food and nutrition questions for families in the appendix to gather information. The questions can be included in the enrollment forms, or collected after the children are accepted into your care. Use the information you receive to plan menus.

## Support families

- Create opportunities for families to share snack and meal ideas. Distribute through newsletters or a website.
- Organize a nutrition information event.
- Help families access affordable, healthy foods.
- Share tips for menu planning on a budget (see pages 24-25).

## Share nutrition information with families

- Share all changes in menus, schedules, policies, food allergies as well as restrictions on food brought from home.
- Share your facility's food and nutrition policy (if you have one).
- Share nutrition information and other helpful resources.
- Share snack and lunch ideas (see appendix).

## Involve families in facility activities

- Ask families to share their children's favourite recipes made from fresh, whole foods, and use them in your menus.
  - Invite families to drop in for lunch.
  - Plan field trips to places where food is grown or sold (ex: farm, farmer's market, grocery store) and invite families to come.
  - Start a gardening project. Invite families to take part by providing seeds or plants, or by taking home seedlings the children have grown.
  - Allow children to share things like stories about special family members they like to cook with or food and their heritage. They could also share favorite family recipes, photos, or vegetables and fruit from family gardens.
- Ask children to bring in photos or drawings of themselves and their families sharing a meal, or doing activities that involve food. Post these on a bulletin board to share with the other children and their families.
  - Ask families for their opinions when making changes to your nutrition policy or menus, and give them time to adjust to any changes.



## Inform families about foods their children are eating

- Keep menus posted so families are aware of the foods their children are being offered.
- Keep track of what children are eating at your facility. This will promote well-rounded diets, which are important for their overall health and well-being.
- Let families know what their children have eaten while in your care, by telling them, or providing them with a written food journal.

### Food journal for infants

- Provide a written journal for all infants, that families can take home daily.
- Record food, milk and water intake, naps and diaper changes so families can plan for the rest of the day.
- See appendix for a food journal for infants you can photocopy and use in your facility.

### Food journal for children

- Food journals for children would likely be used temporarily – when challenges arise.
- Food journals can be helpful when working with “picky” eaters or children with food allergies. They are also useful when children are ill.
- Knowing what their children have eaten while in your care will help families to balance their food intake at home.
- You could consider printing out your menu for the day to communicate to parents how much of each food their children have eaten, or photocopy the form in the appendix and use it in your facility.

## Talk with families about sensitive food issues

- Listen to families’ concerns right away, in a private setting.
- Be sensitive to families’ circumstances, cultural practices and religious beliefs.
- Be respectful when suggesting different ideas and options.
- Be realistic about families’ busy schedules and the realities of parenting.
- See page 34 for tips to improve lunches and snacks coming from home.
- Contact your child care co-ordinator or local public health office for help, if needed.
- Get help from a registered dietitian.