

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Using Offer Versus Serve in the CACFP

Compliance

Purpose: This handout provides the basic requirements for serving reimbursable meals through Offer Versus Serve in the CACFP

Offer Versus Serve (OVS) is a type of meal service option that is designed to limit food waste. It allows children ages 6–18 and adult participants to have a choice on what foods they will eat. OVS supports good nutrition by providing a variety of food choices while reducing food waste.

At-risk afterschool programs and emergency shelters operating the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) are eligible to use OVS. It allows children ages 6–18 the option to decline some of the foods offered in a reimbursable breakfast, lunch, or supper. Understanding how to use this meal service will ensure compliance with the CACFP. Therefore, focusing on the basic requirements for serving reimbursable meals through Offer Versus Serve is essential for knowing how to serve meals using OVS.

OVS Core Standards

OVS allows children to decline some foods offered at meals.

OVS is allowed only for breakfast, lunch, and supper, but snacks are not reimbursable. Snacks have only two required meal components. If the child declined one of the snack meal components, the snack might not meet nutritional needs.

OVS is only allowed in the CACFP for older children attending at-risk afterschool programs for one key reason. OVS is not appropriate for younger children. During the early years, young children are developing healthy eating habits. They need guidance from adults to try new foods, and they need to see those around them eating a variety of foods. OVS may limit their exposure to new foods and, therefore, is not allowed.

Important Terms to Know

Before planning to use OVS in your at-risk afterschool program, it is important to understand three terms: food component, food item, and combination food.

- A *meal component* is one of the five food categories that make up a reimbursable meal: milk, meats/meat alternates, vegetables, fruits, and grains.
- A *food item* is a specific food offered within the food component to make up a reimbursable meal. For example, broccoli and carrots are two food items that make up the vegetable component.
- A *combination food* is a food that contains two or more meal components that cannot be separated. For example, a vegetable pizza has three meal components: grains (crust), vegetables (vegetable toppings and sauce), and meat alternate (cheese).

Meal Requirements at Breakfast

When using OVS at breakfast, include food items from the following three components: milk, vegetables and/or fruits, and grains. Offer at least one food item from each of these meal components in the minimum serving sizes. Then, include a fourth food item, which can be one additional item from the fruit and vegetable component or the grains component. The fourth food item can also be from the meat/meat alternate component.

All meal components must be offered in the required minimum serving sizes:

- Milk: 8 fluid ounces
- Vegetable and fruit: ½ cup
- Grain: 1-ounce equivalent
- Meat/Meat alternate: 1 ounce

Larger portions than these may need to be served to children ages 13–18 to meet their nutritional needs.

Participants need to take at least three different food items from any of those offered. For example, at breakfast, you offered:

- ½ cup bananas
- ½ cup strawberries
- 1 serving whole grain-rich pancakes
- 1 cup (8 ounces) fluid milk

The child selects three different food items, such as bananas, pancakes, and milk, or bananas, strawberries, and milk. These selections will credit as a reimbursable breakfast meal because they selected three different food items in the minimum serving sizes.

Meal Requirements at Lunch and Supper

When using OVS at lunch and supper, offer at least one food item, in the minimum serving sizes, from each of the five meal components: milk, vegetable, fruit, grain, and meat/meat alternate.

The minimum serving sizes for each meal component are:

- Milk: 8 fluid ounces
- Vegetable: ½ cup
- Fruit: ¼ cup
- Grain: 1-ounce equivalent
- Meat/Meat alternate: 2 ounces

Remember, larger portions than these may need to be served to children ages 13–18 to meet their nutritional needs.

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The child needs to take at least three meal components, rather than three items, in the minimum serving sizes for a reimbursable meal. For example, at lunch, you offered:

- 2 ounces of parmesan chicken
- ¼ cup of fruit salad
- ½ cup of broccoli
- 1 cup of pasta
- 1 cup (8 ounces) of fluid milk

The child may take 2 ounces of parmesan chicken, ½ cup of broccoli, and 1 cup of milk as a reimbursable meal or any other combination of three different food items.

If your site serves meals to at-risk afterschool participants (or emergency shelters) in the CACFP, consider using Offer Versus Serve. OVS gives children a choice to decline some of the food offered in a reimbursable breakfast, lunch, or supper while still meeting their nutritional needs.

References

- Institute of Child Nutrition. (2018). *Child and adult meal pattern requirements: A CACFP meal pattern requirements supplemental training*. <https://theicn.org/cacfp>
- U. S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2016). *CACFP 05-2017 offer versus serve and family style meals in the Child and Adult Care Food Program*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resources>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). *Final Rule - Child Nutrition Programs: Meal patterns consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-042524>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2018). *Offer versus serve in the Child and Adult Care Food Program*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resources>

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