



# Insight

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the National Food Service Management Institute — Summer 2003

## *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist...a Program Self-Assessment Tool for Family Day Care Home and Child Care Center Providers Participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program*

**O** Nutritious meals and snacks are an important aspect of quality child care. One indicator of quality is participation of the family day care home (FDCH) or child care center in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). According to the latest figures available from USDA, approximately 2.85 million children are served a meal each day in FDCHs and child care centers participating in the CACFP. The application of the CACFP meal and snack patterns and the financial support furnished through the CACFP provide a framework for quality that helps child care providers meet the food and nutrition needs of children. Since child care providers are directly responsible for the quality of care offered, they should find it helpful to initiate and participate in program assessment on a regular basis. The knowledge gained through an assessment process will aid child care providers in developing plans and taking the steps that support continuous program improvement.

In an effort to support child care professionals' commitment to quality child care, the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), Applied Research Division planned and conducted a research study designed to develop a program self-assessment checklist based on established standards that focused on the food and nutrition services of child care operations. State agencies and sponsoring organizations are the agencies that provide guidance to child care programs operating within the guidelines of the CACFP. NFSMI wanted to build on this structure and issue a comprehensive voluntary program self-assessment checklist. Use of a checklist at a regular interval, such as once each year, would enhance existing training and program management.

Researchers reviewed CACFP regulations and guidance resources to determine existing statements described as quality indicators for inclusion in the program self-assessment checklist. An expert panel composed of leading CACFP professionals representing state agencies, sponsoring organizations, NFSMI, and USDA, Food and Nutrition Service provided input and assistance in the selection and wording of quality indicators. The expert panel determined the need for one program self-assessment checklist for FDCH providers and one for use in the child care center setting. The *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*, incorporating the

quality indicators identified as "best practices," was developed from expert panel suggestions.

This research took advantage of various published nutrition standards that are available to CACFP program participants. No attempt was made to identify and validate new standards of practice for the CACFP. These resources address content such as meal pattern requirements, menu planning, safe food handling practices, feeding infants, introducing new foods, establishing pleasant eating environments, nutrition education, planning, and record keeping. The best practices included in the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* are consistent with the CACFP regulations and guidance and training materials issued by the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. Additionally, best practices included in the checklist are consistent with the Head Start Performance Standards. Examples of resources used to identify best practices included the *Management Improvement Guidance: Child Care Center Sponsors and Independent Centers*, *Management Improvement Guidance: Family Day Care Home Sponsors*, *Building Blocks for Fun and Healthy Meals*, and *Feeding Infants: A Guide for Use in the Child Nutrition Program*. (See Resources for additional materials used.)

Best practice indicators were organized into three main programmatic areas on the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*: 1) Administration and Operations, 2) Nutrition, and 3) Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Children—Working with Parents and Others in the Community. Although not identical, these three areas are consistent with CACFP guidance materials. During the final step in the development of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*, a pilot test of the checklist was conducted. A geographically diverse group of FDCH and child care center providers used the checklist to conduct a program assessment and provide feedback regarding the checklists. The final version of the checklists reflects the results of the pilot test.

This research project was conducted under contract with Mississippi State University. Informed consent procedures for the protection of human subjects in research were followed throughout the research.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVE

The objective of this project was to develop a research-based program self-assessment tool for FDCH and child care center providers participating in the CACFP. To accomplish this goal the following strategies were used:

- ✓ Identify all major CACFP program regulations and guidance materials as well as other appropriate child care guidance materials related to quality food and nutrition services in the child care setting, such as those related to the Head Start Program.
- ✓ Determine the areas or aspects of providing quality food and nutrition services to be included on a program self-assessment checklist.
- ✓ Determine the quality indicators (best practices) related to food and nutrition services to be included on a program self-assessment checklist.
- ✓ Seek input for an expert panel on the content and format for the program self-assessment checklist.
- ✓ Pilot test the program self-assessment checklist with CACFP providers in FDCH and child care centers.

## The Assessment Process and Quality Improvement

Assessment of the application of best practices is the first step in quality improvement. Self-assessment and personal professional responsibility are key characteristics of any professional group for maintaining and performing at a level of competence. Program quality begins with professional competence; therefore, program assessment is also a self-assessment process for the child care provider. All programs can benefit from an assessment process; even the most excellent programs are interested in program improvement. The program self-assessment process will validate the current level of excellence maintained by those programs. Additionally, professional associations, state child nutrition programs, and state child care agencies are valuable resources for self-assessment guidelines and sample instruments.

In the assessment process, the individual reflects on the current level of achievement, knowledge, or skills. In program assessment, the individual most responsible for the best practices should complete the assessment. It may be helpful to include others on the child care staff in completing the assessment so that helpers, teachers, and food service staff are familiar with the expectations for a quality program. Program assessment conducted as a team is one way to communicate expectations and increase commitment to quality improvement by those involved. Program assessment should result in focused training with a greater potential for performing best practices that support long-term continuous quality improvement.



## Benefits of Implementing Program Assessment

The *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* is a tool useful in implementing or beginning a self-assessment program. Possible benefits of program self-assessment include:

- Verification of current level of achievement.
- Identification of training needs.
- Development of focused planning and program improvement.
- Identification of opportunities to expand the scope of the program to include parents and other stakeholders not currently involved in the program.
- Opportunity to work together as a team to support best practices.
- Demonstration of commitment to the nutrition program and quality child care.
- Increased knowledge and understanding of nutrition services as an essential part of quality child care.
- Potential for professional recognition by peers, state agencies, and sponsoring organizations.
- Potential application to local, state, and national professional recognition processes, such as licensure, certification, and credentialing for the child care facility and providers.

## Taking the Steps to Nutrition Success

Participating in the CACFP is the first step to nutrition success. When nutritious meals and snacks are served in a child-friendly setting, CACFP participants are on the way to providing a quality nutrition program. The *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* includes best practices for quality nutrition programs. A regular, periodic use of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* will help users determine if they are using best practices in their child care nutrition program.

There are three main sections to the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*—1) Administration and Operations, 2) Nutrition, and 3) Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Children-Working with Parents and Others in the Community. Users follow the five easy steps below and are encouraged to involve the child care staff, teachers, and parents whenever possible in completing the checklist.

### Five Steps to Nutrition Success

- Step 1: Complete the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* by marking the response that best describes your nutrition program.
- Step 2: Decide which best practices you want to add or improve.
- Step 3: Select a few best practices at a time and begin to make improvements in your nutrition program.
- Step 4: Take advantage of nutrition education and other resources provided by the state and sponsoring organizations to make improvements. Take time to think about your progress in achieving the best practices you are working to improve.
- Step 5: Complete the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* at least once a year to ensure that you continue to provide a quality nutrition program.

## Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist for **Child Care Centers**

### **Best Practices for Quality Nutrition Programs**

#### **SECTION: ADMINISTRATION AND OPERATIONS**

In this section, you will consider **Best Practices** related to the administration and operation of a quality nutrition program in your child care center.

#### **Best Practices Checklist: Guidelines and Procedures**

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) guidelines and procedures are designed to help you provide the highest quality nutrition program to children. Following these guidelines will assure that you receive reimbursement for meals and snacks. Best Practices in quality nutrition programs include following all the guidelines and procedures of the CACFP. Your state agency or sponsor may have additional procedures that you must follow.

Indicate if your program meets each of the Best Practices below. Check "Yes" if you are already doing a Best Practice. Check "Some" if you have started working on a Best Practice. Check "Maybe" if you might work on a Best Practice in the future. Check "NA" (Not Applicable) if you do not think the Best Practice is something you need to be doing.

<b>Best Practices</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>SOME</b>	<b>MAYBE</b>	<b>NA</b>
The child care center recognizes the importance of food and nutrition to healthy child development.				
The nutrition requirements of the CACFP, Head Start, or licensure are used to ensure that the food and nutrition needs of children are met.				
The child care nutrition program has written food and nutrition procedures for the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feeding children with allergies</li><li>• Foods brought from home</li><li>• Food substitutions</li><li>• Feeding children with special needs</li><li>• Others are developed as needed</li></ul>				
Child care personnel, including nutrition staff, teachers, and parents, are familiar with all food and nutrition procedures.				
All food and nutrition procedures are consistent with state and federal regulations.				
Daily food production records are accurate and complete.				

# Excerpts from Checklists

## Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist for **Family Day Care Homes**

### **Best Practices for Quality Nutrition Programs**

#### **SECTION: ADMINISTRATION AND OPERATIONS**

In this section, you will consider **Best Practices** related to the administration and operation of a quality nutrition program in your family day care home.

#### **Best Practices Checklist: Guidelines and Procedures**

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) guidelines and procedures are designed to help you provide the highest quality nutrition program to children. Following these guidelines will assure that you receive reimbursement for meals and snacks. Best Practices in quality nutrition programs include following all the guidelines and procedures of the CACFP. Your state agency or sponsor may have additional procedures that you must follow.

Indicate if your program meets each of the Best Practices below. Check "Yes" if you are already doing a Best Practice. Check "Some" if you have started working on a Best Practice. Check "Maybe" if you might work on a Best Practice in the future. Check "NA" (Not Applicable) if you do not think the Best Practice is something you need to be doing.

<b>Best Practices</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>SOME</b>	<b>MAYBE</b>	<b>NA</b>
Recognize the importance of food and nutrition to healthy child development.				
Follow all nutrition requirements of the CACFP, licensure, or registration to ensure that the food and nutrition needs of children are met.				
Have written food and nutrition procedures for the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feeding children with allergies</li><li>• Foods brought from home</li><li>• Food substitutions</li><li>• Feeding children with special needs</li><li>• Others are developed as needed</li></ul>				
Submit on time information required by the program sponsor.				
Make sure child care helpers and parents are familiar with all food and nutrition procedures.				
Make sure all food and nutrition procedures are consistent with state and federal regulations.				



## METHOD

**Development of *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* Program Self-Assessment Tool for Family Day Care Home and Child Care Center Providers Participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program**

### ***Phase I: Selection of Best Practice Indicators***

- Researchers identified indicators of best practice for quality food and nutrition services in the CACFP for inclusion on the assessment tool using published CACFP and child care standards and guidance materials.
- A CACFP expert panel representing state agencies, sponsoring organizations, NFSML, and USDA, Food and Nutrition Services was selected.



### ***Phase II: Participation of Expert Panel***

- A draft of the program self-assessment tool was mailed to the expert panel for a thorough and independent review.
- The expert panel was convened to discuss needed modifications in the draft materials. Expert panel members were asked to react to the appropriateness of the best practices included, identify gaps and overlaps, suggest organizational structure, and comment on readability and format.
- The expert panel identified additional resources needed to support the final list of best practices.
- The comments and suggestions provided by the expert panel were incorporated into the second draft, and separate versions were developed for FDCHs and child care centers.
- The expert panel reviewed the second draft of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* and provided final comments for minor revisions.
- The expert panel identified child care providers to participate in a pilot test of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*.

### ***Phase III: Pilot Test of Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist***

- Pilot participants included those individuals who planned the menus in the facilities. Participants had access to all aspects of the food and nutrition services covered in the draft *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*.
- Pilot participants evaluated the checklist and assessment process.
- The results of the evaluation were incorporated into the final version of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*.

## RESULTS

### ***Pilot Test***

Fifty-six FDCH providers and 29 child care center providers represented the two groups of participants to pilot test the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*. Names and contact information were provided by the expert panel. Thirty-one FDCH (55%) and 12 child care center providers (41%) completed and returned the program self-assessment and evaluation form, generating a overall study return rate of 51%.

The pilot participants reported having the following job titles: center director (3) and family day care home provider (24); and one response for each of the following: center nutritionist, center cook, executive vice-president, nutrition manager, child care coordinator, assistant director, health services manager, and group day care operator. The researchers confirmed that pilot participants had access to all aspects of the food and nutrition services covered in both versions of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*.

Pilot participants were instructed to assess their operation, using the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* and a 12-item evaluation form that measured the value, usability, and clarity of the checklist and the program self-assessment process. Overall, the response to the 12-item evaluation indicated a high level of agreement for use of the checklist. The "Stat Facts" (on the next page) presents those findings. There were significant differences between the two groups related to participation in program self-assessment, desired need for training, and interest in receiving recognition from a sponsor or state agency for completing the checklist. The differences were as follows:

- Child care center providers (75%) were participating in some form of assessment, as compared to 38% of FDCH providers.
- Child care center providers (58%) disagreed that training on the checklist would be helpful, while 87% of FDCH providers agreed or strongly agreed that training would be useful.
- Child care center providers (64%) disagreed that they would be interested in receiving recognition from a sponsor or state agency for completing the checklist, while 76% of FDCH providers indicated that they would be interested in the recognition.

The length of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* and the time required to do a thorough assessment were of concern to a few. Given the many responsibilities and duties for child care givers, it is not surprising that time might be a factor in participating in program self-assessment. All pilot participants recorded some comments about how well the child care program was operating utilizing various best practices identified in the self-

assessment instrument. These comments indicated that pilot participants took a thoughtful look at their programs during the pilot test. Thirty-four of 43 (81%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that they would be willing to complete the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* on a regular basis (i.e., once a year) to help them continue to offer a quality nutrition program.

Overall comments made by the participants provided information about their overall thoughts regarding program assessment and the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*. Listed are a few comments made by participants in this research process:

*“Child care providers play a central role in shaping the nutrition habits of young children. The CACFP is key in teaching child care providers the importance of good nutrition. Nutrition success is ensured when the child care provider completes a program assessment of nutrition knowledge/existing practices and identifies training needs or specific areas where improvement may be necessary or recommended.”*

*“I think the Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist will be great for home day cares or small community day cares that do not have federal or state guidelines.”*

*“The Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist reinforces and reminds me of best practices that support a quality child care program.”*

## Practical Use of This Information

Implementation of a self-monitoring program assessment process provides a time to reflect and assess existing practices being performed in the child care program. When CACFP providers self-monitor the level of best practices on a regular basis, they actively participate in the quality assurance process. Sponsor monitors and state agency staff can take advantage of the results of the implementation of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* through focused follow-up, technical assistance, and training that is specific to the needs identified by the CACFP providers themselves. Written comments from the pilot participants indicated that they are presently engaged in various training and assessment activities that help them maintain and improve quality in their child care program. Numerous comments also indicate that additional training is needed in several key areas, including dealing with choking, ideas for menus, and safe food handling practices. While a few programs might not see the opportunities to implement new best practices in food and nutrition services, comments provided by the pilot participants supported the value of a self-

## STAT FACTS

*The following percentages represent responses by providers participating in the pilot test of the Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*

- 98** ...Percent reported the Best Practices identified in the checklist are consistent with the rules and regulations of the CACFP and the Best Practices represent the best care given to children in the child care setting.
- 95** ...Percent reported strong agreement that the checklist covers all the important issues for implementing a CACFP operated child care program.
- 95** ...Percent reported the Best Practices in the checklist were stated clearly.
- 93** ...Percent reported the checklist was easy to use.
- 93** ...Percent reported the checklist will assist child care providers to reach program requirements and goals.
- 88** ...Percent reported the checklist could have a positive long-term impact on the nutrition program.
- 81** ...Percent reported a willingness to complete the checklist on a regular basis.
- 74** ...Percent reported a need for training on the use of the checklist.
- 65** ...Percent reported an interest in receiving recognition from the sponsoring organization and state agency for using the checklist.
- 50** ...Percent reported involvement in a self-assessment process.

monitoring program self-assessment process using the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist*.

State agencies, sponsoring organizations, and NFSMI can use these findings in developing strategies, including training opportunities, for professional and personal growth for CACFP participants. Taking advantage of professional growth opportunities based upon the best practices presented in the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* should enhance an individual child care professional’s ability to move to higher levels of achievement while monitoring the quality of nutrition care provided. For a complete report of this project and a copy of the *Steps to Nutrition Success Checklist* for FDCH providers and child care providers, check the NFSMI web site at [www.nfsmi.org](http://www.nfsmi.org).

## For More Information

### RESOURCES:

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