



## Farm to Early Care and Education Frequently Asked Questions

As it relates to Farm to Early Care and Education programs:

### **Q: What is Farm to Early Care and Education?**

A: Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) is a program that grew out of the Farm to School movement and encompasses a range of programs and activities. It encourages young children to experience eating fresh fruits and vegetables while their preferences for food are still forming. It encourages healthy choices in children by offering experiences with good nutrition and hands-on education through cooking and gardening. Farm to ECE also improves access to healthy food at home and in the community.

Farm to ECE provides programs and activities that include:

- Local Food Procurement
- Edible School Gardens
- Cooking with Kids
- Taste Tests
- Farm Field Trips
- Nutrition and Agriculture Education
- Family and Community Engagement
- Wellness Policies that Promote Farm to ECE programs

### **Q: Is Farm to ECE encouraged by Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning?**

A: Farm to ECE is encouraged by the Nutrition Services Division of Bright from the Start. The Nutrition Services division administers the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Services Program (SFSP) in Georgia. Nutrition Services Division along with USDA's encouragement of local foods and related activities is outlined in the [Local Foods in CACFP Policy Memo](#). Child Care Services (CCS) Division of Bright from the Start is in support of the Nutrition Services' vision of Farm to ECE.

### **Q: Can I use CACFP funds to purchase materials for Farm to ECE projects, like gardening?**

A: Yes, an institution or facility can use funds from the nonprofit food service account to purchase items for gardens. This may include seeds, fertilizer, watering cans, rakes, etc., to grow food that will be used in CACFP food service. The produce grown in the garden must be used as part of the reimbursable meal and/or for nutritional education activities such as taste testing. Child Care Learning Centers (CCLC) or Family Child Care Learning Homes (FCCLH) using garden

produce in their CACFP reimbursable meals should document the weight and/or volume of the produce.

### As it relates to school gardens:

#### **Q: Are tomatoes permissible in the garden?**

A: Yes, tomatoes are permissible in the garden. CCS strongly advises that providers heavily supervise children in the garden. A posted notice named [Georgia Poisonous Plant List](#) was issued by CCS in 2015. The term poisonous does not imply that the plant is fatal. Generally, common plants with poisonous properties mean that plant components need to be ingested for there to be a poisonous exposure. Tomato leaves and stems can be poisonous if ingested in large amounts. Again, CCS strongly advises that providers heavily supervise children in the garden.

#### **Q: I know that carrots are a choking hazard, but can I grow them in my preschool garden?**

A: If planting carrots, or other foods that may be a potential choking hazard, ensure that you prepare them properly to decrease the risk of choking in young children. For example, if you are growing carrots, make sure you wash them well, cook until soft, and chop the carrots into small pieces to prevent a choking hazard. Whole carrots or any other foods that may be a potential choking hazard cannot be served to children less than three years of age.

#### **Q: Are chickens allowed?**

A: There are many stipulations involved with farm animals on premises of centers and homes. Horses or other farm animals shall not be quartered on any property over which the Provider exercises any control that is located within five hundred (500) feet of the building in which the CCLC or the FCCLH is located. Five hundred (500) feet is approximately the length of one (1) football field plus half of a football field.

If a CCLC and FCCLH meet CCS requirements, providers must check zoning ordinances and regulations for the county the center or home is located. There are zoning laws that typically limit the type of animal and number of animals that can be kept at a property. Many ordinances prohibit keeping farm animals at residential and commercial properties.

If a CCLC and FCCLH meet zoning requirements, CCS requires animals on premise to be vaccinated. Furthermore, there is high risk of farm animals spreading *Zoonotic Diseases*, which are diseases that pass from animals to humans. CCS strongly advises strict supervision with children and farm animals. Providers must be aware of cleanliness, sanitation, and injury prevention due to the risk of keeping farm animals. For more on farm animals and diseases, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has content about farm animals and human interaction, [here](#).

#### **Q: Is composting allowed? Where should the compost be kept?**

A: CCS does not have a rule that indicates composting is not allowed at CCLCs or FCCLHs and supports that composting is a great activity to teach children about recycling and respect for

nature and the natural process. CCS would strongly recommend that a CCLC or FCCLH use a composting barrel that does not pose a hazard to children and if not commercially purchased, the homemade compost does not attract rodents, wild animals, etc. The composting barrel must be stored in a designated space away from easy access to children. A CCLC or FCCLH must ensure that children not be permitted in the composting area except as part of a planned, supervised learning experience.



*Picture Example:*

**Q: Can I use collected rainwater (i.e. from a rain barrel) to water edible plants?**

A: CCS would support a CCLC and FCCLH collecting rainwater for the purpose of watering edible plants with the condition that a commercially manufactured rain barrel with a tight-fitting lid is used. The rain barrel must be placed and stored securely away from children and areas accessed by children to prevent injury from tipping, falling, drowning or being pulled or pushed over. The rain barrel must be constructed in a manner that does not promote a breeding ground for pests.



*Picture Example:*

As it relates to classrooms:

**Q: Can I have potting soil in the classroom?**

A: Yes, potting soil is permissible in the classroom of a CCLC or a FCCLH during a supervised, age-appropriate learning activity. CCS advises that providers intensely supervise children while using potting soil during an activity. Potentially hazardous materials shall be stored in an area inaccessible to children. Therefore, once a potted soil activity is complete, the potting soil would need to be stored immediately in an area that is inaccessible to children.

**Q: Can children work on a cooking activity together to create one large communal dish such as a salad or pizza?**

A: Bright from the Start places no restrictions on children working together to create a large communal dish to share. However, we recommend that, due to safety, health, and sanitation

issues, children create their own individual servings rather than work together on a communal dish to be shared by all. For example, try making pita pizzas for each child, instead of one large pizza, or have each salad ingredient in separate bowls and let each child choose what they want in their individual salad. In either case, ensure that children wash hands before they begin cooking, during cooking if needed (if you notice children touching their faces, licking fingers, etc.), and once food preparation has finished. Always make sure that any cooking activity is closely supervised by a staff person and make the environment safe by ensuring that children do not have access to large knives (plastic knives or lettuce knives are great alternatives for children) and that hot cooking equipment (crockpots, burners, pans, etc.) is turned off and moved away from children after cooking is completed.

### As it relates to meal service:

#### **Q: Can I use garden produce in the classroom or as part of school meals?**

A: Yes, garden produce can be used as a part of CACFP reimbursable meals. Produce grown in the garden can be used as part of the reimbursable meal and for nutrition education activities. CCLCs and FCCLHs using garden produce in their CACFP reimbursable meals should document the weight and/or volume of the produce. For quick facts about CACFP and Farm to ECE, click [here](#).

#### **Q: What are the best practices for food safety when growing foods in the garden?**

A: A soil test will provide information on whether the soil in the garden is safe. It is recommended to try to keep all animals, domestic and wild, out of the garden area. Position your garden away from trees, overhead wires and as far from wooded areas as possible. When working in the garden, do your best to keep dogs and cats out as this will help eliminate problems with these animals possibly contaminating your produce and soil.

Gardeners should be careful to keep shoes, gloves and clothing as clean as possible when harvesting. Gardeners should keep fingernails trim to reduce the chances of puncturing produce. Avoid wearing excessive jewelry, rings and watches since they can harbor bacteria. If an individual has been ill with vomiting, diarrhea or fever within the last 24 hours, they must avoid handling produce or working in the garden. The bacteria they may be carrying in their system could be transferred to the produce. Hands should be washed after using the restroom, eating, smoking, changing diapers, handling animals and before entering the garden. They should also be washed upon leaving the garden.

When it is time to harvest, the container being used to hold fruits and vegetables needs to be able to be cleaned and sanitized between uses. Use food grade containers to harvest foods, avoid garbage bags, wicker baskets and other items that cannot be cleaned and sanitized. If at all possible, avoid putting containers on the ground during harvest. Tools (anything that will come in direct contact with the produce) should be cleaned and sanitized after each use. A dishwasher is an ideal way to accomplish this.

#### **Q: What are the best practices for food safety when using and processing foods harvested from the garden?**

A: National Food Service Management Institute's (NFSMI) publication Ready, Set, Go! Creating and Maintaining a Wellness Environment in Child Care Centers Participating in the CACFP (<https://theicn.org/resources/346/other-resources/106579/wellness-for-child-and-adult-care-food-programs.pdf>) provides best practices and assessment tools for the safe handling of food in child care facilities.

In addition, a produce-specific publication has been created for the school environment, and the best practices apply to many child care programs. NFSMI's publication Best Practices: Handling Fresh Produce in School ([https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/Food\\_Safety\\_Produce\\_Best\\_practices.pdf](https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/Food_Safety_Produce_Best_practices.pdf)), developed for Food & Nutrition Service (FNS), outlines recommendations for handling fresh produce at all steps in the food production process.

Best practices address purchasing and receiving, washing and preparation, hand hygiene, serving, storage, training, and general food safety practices. Specific recommendations for handling melons, tomatoes, leafy greens, and sprouts are also included. FNS' Produce Safety University also identifies best practices for selecting, handling, and preparing produce for use in Child Nutrition Programs (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/ofs/produce-safety-university>).

**Q: Can we serve unpasteurized juices under CACFP or as a snack outside of CACFP?**

A: No, unpasteurized juices cannot be served under CACFP. All juices must be pasteurized. Some kinds of juice and cider that have not been pasteurized may contain harmful bacteria. Children and the elderly are particularly susceptible to these bacteria. There is not any guidance about serving unpasteurized juices as snack outside of CACFP, but Nutrition Services would like CCLCs and FCCLHs to exercise strong caution due to significant safety problems of unpasteurized juices.

**Q: Can I make homemade baby food?**

A: A licensed program would have to ensure that the process for making homemade baby food meets USDA guidelines. All infants (children aged 0-12 months) are required to have a feeding plan on file that is updated whenever feeding habits change. The feeding plan should state that the program provides homemade baby food and which types of homemade baby food will be fed to the child. Homemade baby food should not be made from items harvested from the garden.

An infant menu would be required when food is provided to the infants to eat by the CCLC or FCCLH. The menu will ensure that infant meal patterns are being met. Programs will also need to follow guidelines on serving food to children and the temperature in which the food is served. Baby food, either homemade or commercially prepared, should not be prepared or thawed in a microwave as there would be a greater risk of the food being too hot when served to infants.

**Q: What is the best way to introduce new fruits and veggies?**

Early and often! It is important that all new foods are first introduced to small children at home by their parents before it is offered in a CCLC or FCCLH. This will ensure that no child has an allergic reaction to any new fruits or vegetables.

Most babies are developmentally ready to transition to finger foods between 7 and 9 months. You'll know they are ready when they can pick up a piece of food and put it into their mouth by themselves. It is safe for babies this age to feed themselves soft, diced foods, if they are sitting upright in an appropriate feeding chair (like a highchair or other supportive seat). Safe, local fruits and veggies for babies can include steamed sweet potatoes and squash, and very ripe melon and peaches.

Children of all ages may need to see a new food 15-20 times before deciding to try it, so don't give up! Offer new foods alongside familiar foods and encourage them to try it. Do not put pressure on them by making them try a bite or bribing them to try something. Most importantly, let them see you eat it!

**If you have additional questions or to learn more about Farm to ECE in Georgia, contact Diana Myers, Nutrition Health Educator, at [diana.myers@decal.ga.gov](mailto:diana.myers@decal.ga.gov).**