

Key Lessons from the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Webinar: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Innovation

Presenters:

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The Healthy Kids, Healthy Future: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood webinar series explores how to leverage early care and education settings to achieve equitable health outcomes by highlighting opportunities and advances in policy, research, philanthropy, and innovation. Access a [recording](#) of the webinar and review [speaker slides](#). This is a synopsis of the webinar on innovation.

Early care and education (ECE) is an important setting for promoting equitable health outcomes in early childhood by utilizing best practices in healthy eating and physical activity and participating in child nutrition programs that promote food security. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated equity and food security challenges, however, there are opportunities to take the lessons learned during the COVID-19 emergency as well as current interest in helping ECE systems recover to better serve young children and families.

- **Food security and obesity prevention initiatives targeted towards young children help set them on a healthy trajectory for life**

It is important to address the nutrition and physical activity needs of children starting at birth to support their healthy development and growth and shape healthy behaviors in early childhood. To leverage ECE settings to address food security, nutrition, and physical activity in early childhood, the [Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Technical Assistance Program](#) (HKHF TAP)—funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and led by Nemours Children's Health—provides technical assistance (TA) to state agencies, ECE coalitions, and ECE professionals to support them in adopting obesity prevention best practices, embedding best practices in ECE state systems, and exploring innovations such as adopting outdoor learning environments. The Association of State Public Health Nutritionists' [Farm to Early Care Grantee Program](#) (Farm to ECE) offers grants and TA to states, regions, and territories to create Farm to ECE programs connecting young children to healthy, local foods. TA offered by Farm to ECE includes support in providing experiential learning and nutrition education, onsite gardening, and assembling healthy meals. This work has resulted in children eating healthier meals, changing eating behaviors at school and home, and supporting local food systems by purchasing food locally.

- **ECE stakeholders adopted innovative approaches to help families facing increased financial pressures and social isolation at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic**

[Good Food For All](#) is an initiative of the Partnership for a Healthier America and was administered in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin by the Healthy Early Coalition for Physical Activity and Health to address rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Good Food For All developed a program to leverage the ECE system and local transit companies to deliver healthy food boxes and recipes for healthy meals

to families and ECE providers over the course of 12 weeks. The program provided food and recipes to ECE programs that aligned with CACFP food guidelines to help providers create healthy meals for children. The program resulted in self-reported increases in healthy food consumption by young children.

The [Better Together program](#)—led by Nemours Children's Health and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill—advances health equity, instills healthy eating habits, and encourages physical activity early in life through program and system level improvements in ECE settings in low-income communities. At the start of the pandemic, Better Together began hosting virtual [Family Café](#) meetings to engage families and provide informational resources for their children's healthy growth and development. The discussions during the virtual Family Café's focused on informing parents and ECE providers on how they could support young children's social and emotional development and resilience, in addition to adopting healthy eating and physical activity practices. The virtual Family Cafés were effective in building social networks and supports while parents, caregivers, and ECE providers were experiencing social isolation and intense stress.

- **Layered approaches are necessary for integrating equity, diversity, and inclusion strategies in ECE programs and systems**

To promote equitable outcomes for young children, many ECE stakeholders are working to change ECE practices and systems to support healthy growth and development of all children. The HKHF TAP program provides Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) training & TA to enhance state stakeholder capacity to apply an EDI lens to their work. This led participants to taking a variety of approaches to embed equity in their work, such as adopting equity impact tools, integrating individuals with lived experience in their decision-making processes, and compensating community member advisors for their time and expertise. HKHF TAP is also helping states restructure their ECE quality rankings systems to acknowledge ECE programs demonstrating positive change, rather than the current system which unintentionally reinforces inequity through low rankings. The Farm to ECE program works with grantees to build cross-sector relationships to not only improve health food access for young children, but also support local food systems. For example, New Mexico used its Farm to ECE grant to create a statewide food procurement system which helps ECE providers identify and connect with local farmers to make purchasing local food easier and promote economic equity for farmers.

- **A key element of embedding equity in ECE and other systems is shifting power to people in the community**

Embedding equity in early childhood systems requires shifting power to people in the community with lived expertise so that they hold influence and decision-making powers. The Healthy Early Coalition has restructured their decision-making board from a board dominated by state agency representatives, to a board consisting of community members. In this model, the state agency representatives serve as consultants. In addition to building relationships with and recruiting local community leaders with lived expertise to serve on the board, the Coalition also offers stipends in recognition of their time and expertise. The Coalition has found that shifting power to communities is a process of continuous assessment and adjustment to ensure its work is equity driven.