

Title: Food-related Policies and Practices: A Look Inside Childcare Facilities

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Abstract

Children develop and form their thoughts and behaviors surrounding food, eating, and mealtimes early on and then carry them into adulthood. Research on the role that caregivers and childcare environments have on the development of such thoughts and behaviors in young children is just beginning. The purpose of this study was to assess how mealtime behaviors of childcare center staff and the policies set by childcare facilities influence children and their eating behaviors. Four different childcare facilities, all with multiple classrooms hosting children based on age, were included in the study. One of the facilities was part of a university, one was part of an organization, and two were smaller in size and privately owned. Directors of childcare facilities were contacted and, upon agreement to participate, site visits and observations were conducted at a meal time in classrooms housing children ages 3-4 years. In addition, childcare facility handbooks were requested and analyzed. The results found two significant correlations between policies and displayed behaviors, a perfect (meal style) and positive (discipline) correlation, both involving food related punishments. Some negative behaviors, such as making inappropriate comments about food, were seen to be more frequent in facilities, but sample size limits the applicability of results to other facilities. Creating outlines for appropriate food and mealtime-related behaviors and communication between staff and children in childcare facilities could help improve the childcare environment. In turn, the improved environment could lead to development of positive thoughts and behaviors surrounding food and eating among children.