



Georgia Growing Fit Wellness Policies for Early Care Settings

Welcome and Purpose of Toolkit

Purpose of the Growing Fit Kit

As educators of young children, you care about helping them grow up healthy and strong and you know that early childhood environments play a critical role in the comprehensive approach to improving child health.

This tool kit is intended to guide you in the development or improvements to your policies around nutrition and physical activity. This tool kit can also help you move toward achievement of Quality Rated standards by helping you meet what the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) refers to as Quality Rated Portfolio Standard 2.1.

The tool kit contains an explanation of what a wellness policy is and how wellness policies work; success stories from other early care settings; a step-by-step guide to improve nutrition and physical activity in your early childhood environment; and resources for your center and teachers. The tool kit has been designed to be provided to you through a face-to-face training and delivered with a package of items like music and books about nutrition to use in your center, although it can be used as a stand-alone guide as well.

What is an Early Care Wellness Policy?

A Wellness Policy is a written document or documents that state the specific approaches promoted and followed in your facility or environment to create and support the healthiest possible environment. Comprehensive wellness policies can improve children's health, if all of the staff are aware of the policy and understand how to implement it on a day-to-day basis. Day-to-day practices implementing the policy play a key role in creating a healthy environment for young children and preparing them to develop healthy eating and physical activity habits for a lifetime. Caregivers are also role models and wellness policies in early childhood environments can help support teachers and staff seeking to achieve a healthy lifestyle.

Importance of Nutrition and Physical Activity in Early Childhood

A healthy lifestyle is essential for the growth and development of young children. Good nutrition and regular physical activity support children's physical health, academic achievement and emotional well-being. Sadly, it is the lowest income children who are at greatest risk of being at an unhealthy weight, poor academic performance, and lifelong chronic disease.





Nutrition and physical activity are essential to children's health. Overweight and obesity are the result of too few calories expended for the amount of calories consumed, and are the result of more than just behavior. This calorie imbalance is also influenced by genetics and, most importantly, by the food environment, such as access to fresh fruits and vegetables and availability of high sugar and high fat foods.¹

Nationwide, 1 in 3 children are overweight or obese by their 5th birthday. In Georgia, the numbers are higher. More than one in three (35 percent) of children ages 2-19 are overweight or obese. More than 1 in 10 children become obese between the ages of 2 to 5; and 5 percent of 6- to 11-year-olds are *severely* obese. Georgia's lowest income children, even the ones who may live in a household that experiences food insecurity, are at greatest risk of being overweight or obese. Between 2008 and 2011, 18 states, including Georgia, and one U.S. territory experienced a decline in obesity rates among preschoolers from low-income families. While we have made progress recently, Georgia still has a higher percentage of children who are overweight or obese than the national average. And, racial and ethnic disparities in weight status emerge in childhood; black and Hispanics are significantly more likely than whites to be obese. Contrary to popular belief, children who are overweight or obese are not likely to outgrow their weight status as adults. Childhood obesity contributes to lifelong chronic diseases, such as Type 2 Diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis and sleep apnea.^{2,3}

In addition, research over the past decade has consistently concluded that children who eat well and are physically active learn better. Conversely, poorly nourished, overweight, sedentary or hungry children tend to have weaker academic performance and score lower on standardized achievement tests over time.⁴

You have a unique opportunity to implement model practices that can dramatically impact the health and learning of Georgia's children. Creating a healthy food environment and developing healthy eating and physical activity skills at a young age in Georgia's early care environments will help to create a healthier population, reduce obesity and chronic disease, and allow for children to develop, grow, learn, and have a healthy future. Implementing a wellness policy will demonstrate that your organization recognizes the importance of lifelong health and that lifelong health and learning starts in early childhood.

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¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Childhood Overweight and Obesity: A Growing Problem [website]. Available from: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/problem.html>

² Robert Wood Johnson and Trust for America's Health. State of Obesity [online publication]. Available from: <http://stateofobesity.org/>

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Childhood Overweight and Obesity [webpage]. Available from: Obesity and Overweight.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Division of Adolescent and School Health. Health and Academics and Data and Statistics, 2012. Association between health risk behaviors and academic grades. Available from: http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/data.htm.





Department of Early Care and Learning's (DECAL) Quality Rated Recognition

Quality Rated is Georgia's system to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early education and school-age care programs. Similar to rating systems for hotels or restaurants, Quality Rated assigns a rating (e.g., one star, two star, or three star) to early education and school-age care programs that go above and beyond minimum licensing standards. By participating in Quality Rated, child care programs demonstrate their commitment to continuous quality improvement. Hundreds of providers have accepted the challenge to embark on a path of continuous quality improvement. Improved physical activity and nutrition are a part of achieving quality rating.

There are three steps to Quality Rated recognition—

Step 1—Application

Create an account and complete a brief application with demographic information about your program to get started on the path to becoming Quality Rated.

Step 2—Portfolio

Earn points by submitting evidence of the credentials and training of the teaching staff; your program's commitment to child health and physical activity; the ways you support family engagement; practices around instruction and curriculum; and your classroom ratios and group size. ***The information in this tool kit can help you achieve some of the requirements for Portfolio Standard #2.***

Step 3—Assessment

Earn points based on your support of the development of children's reasoning skills, social-emotional development, language, and school readiness.

By working toward Quality Rated and comprehensive wellness policies using the information in this tool kit, your early care environment can help Georgia achieve healthier children now and a healthier future for everyone.

