

IMPLEMENTING NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY POLICIES IN A LARGE NATIONAL CHILDCARE ORGANIZATION

Learning Care Group (LCG), a leading early childhood education and care provider, made a 3-year commitment with the **Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA)** to implement several evidence-based nutrition and physical activity policies in more than 900 child care centers. As part of its pledge, LCG teamed with the UConn Rudd Center to assess its Grow Fit Program. The goal was to ensure compliance with these objectives at throughout its 900+ centers and to complete the first large-scale, mixed-methods study yielding findings to inform the implementation of other early care and education wellness policies. Below is a look at the impact of implementing several of these objectives.

1 Objectives & Strategies

Serve healthier food:



Centers were expected to serve **at least 2 fruits and vegetables each day**, eat meals **family-style**, and introduce **healthier celebrations**.

Serve healthier beverages:



No more than **4 ounces of 100% juice** was permitted to be served each day, and centers aimed to decrease whole milk, **increase 1% skim milk for children over 2**, and **increase access to water**. The goal evolved, and **juice was totally eliminated in the final year of the commitment**.

2 Methods



1. Surveyed directors across 900+ centers at 6, 18, and 36 months.
2. Conducted interviews with organizational leadership.
3. Reviewed policies and other key documents distributed to support policy implementation.

3 Results

95%

Served at least 2 fruits and vegetables daily (up from 63%)

99%

Ate meals family style (up from 71%)

80%

Practiced healthier celebrations (up from 67%)

100%

Served no more than 4 ounces of 100% juice daily (up from 84%)

96%

Provided access to water freely throughout the day (up from 78%)

4 Impact

A year of change by the numbers:

100,000

children and infants served

1,894,740

pieces of fresh fruit

953,820

gallons of milk

69 million

meals provided

5 semi trucks

of sugar cut from meals



5 Implications

Practice:



Take a comprehensive approach

By compiling resources into one place (LCG's Health and Safety Manual), centers were better-equipped to implement changes in all five goal areas: physical activity, screen time, food, beverages, and infant feeding. The comprehensive nature of these goals also created synergy; for example, policies on physical activity helped to reinforce policies on screen time.



Provide structural supports

LCG centers order all foods and beverages from one national vendor, and the options available through that vendor are determined by LCG at the corporate level. By making only whole milk, 1%, and fat-free milk available choices on the vendor's platform, center directors were not forced into one variety of milk, but they were structurally guided towards healthier options.



Build the initiative over time

As people and places evolve, it becomes imperative for policies to evolve as well. For example, LCG first implemented a policy to serve no more than 4 ounces of juice per day. That policy progressed to serving juice three times per week and eventually to not serving any juice.



Replace old practices with new ones

One of LCG's biggest challenges was changing the way that birthdays and other special events are celebrated. Parents were hesitant to give up the old ways that birthdays were celebrated and continued to send in unapproved items. In response, LCG created a "Grow Fit Celebrations Guide" to highlight that every celebration should involve movement and healthy foods and to provide resources for healthy snack ideas.



Communicate thoroughly with parents and teachers

Awareness and understanding are the first steps to implementing change. By educating teachers, who served as the front-line of communication with parents, LCG was able to recruit more supporters of its new policies. Hosting parent nights, sending monthly newsletters, and constant communication enabled LCG to explain new changes and communicate effectively.

Policy:

Early care and education leaders should create and track compliance with comprehensive policies that address wellness in order to support healthy eating and physical activity for children in their care.

Research:

The healthier celebration policy was the most controversial with parents; therefore, future research should test which messaging strategies are the most persuasive for parents of young children.