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For Immediate Release: May, 8, 2018

Participation in Federal Meal-Subsidy Program Promotes Healthy Eating in Child Care Centers

Hartford, Conn. – Connecticut child care centers participating in a federal food assistance program do a better job at feeding preschoolers healthy foods than non-participating centers, according to a new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut.

Nationwide, 4 million children receive subsidized meals and snacks through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which provides financial support for food served in child care centers and family day care homes, and applies standards to the types and quantity of foods served. Through regulations that require all licensed child care centers to follow CACFP nutrition standards, the program plays a key role in helping young children enrolled in these centers develop healthy eating habits. Because the program targets support for low-income children, CACFP has become an important policy tool in addressing food security and improving nutrition in young children.

The researchers assessed the dietary quality of lunches and feeding practices for preschool-age children at 97 licensed child care centers in Connecticut, and made comparisons by participation in CACFP. A total of 838 preschool-age children participated in the study, conducted between June 2015 and July 2016. Until now, little was known about meals served in child care centers that do not participate in CACFP and how they compare with CACFP meals and nutrition standards, which require serving low-fat/skim milk, fruit and vegetables, encourage whole grains, and limit the amount of added sugars and solid fats in meals.

“One of the main differences we found is that most non-CACFP centers were not providing low-fat or skim milk, as required by CACFP, so saturated fat intake among preschoolers attending these centers was higher than in CACFP centers,” said Tatiana Andreyeva, Director of Economic Initiatives for the UConn Rudd Center, Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, and lead author of the study. “It’s an easy switch from whole or reduced-fat milk to low-fat milk because the cost is typically the same. This would make a difference nutritionally and help ensure compliance with state licensing regulations.”

Another important difference was that the CACFP centers were more likely to provide both a fruit and a vegetable at lunch, although consumption of fruit and vegetables was low across all centers.

The study also showed that the CACFP centers were more likely to embrace a recommended practice of serving children family style. Serving meals family style helps children learn social skills, allows them to take smaller portions and seconds if they want, encourages trying new foods by seeing other children and adults eating them, and allows staff to act as role models by sitting at the same table and eating the same meal as the children.

The findings of the new study, published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, have important implications for children's health and obesity prevention nationally. The diets of most U.S. children fail to meet the federal 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, placing children at risk for developing obesity and diet-related chronic diseases. Child care settings represent an important opportunity to influence children's eating habits and health, as two-thirds of preschool-children are cared for outside the home.

Other key findings of the study include:

- A substantial proportion of non-CACFP child care centers were not in compliance with CACFP nutrition standards and hence state licensing regulations. Only 30 percent of the non-CACFP centers served low-fat/skim milk to preschoolers and all required meal components, which were grain, meat/meat alternate, fruit or vegetable, and milk at the time of the study. Most states require compliance with CACFP nutrition standards in licensed child care centers.
- Across the centers examined, total average calorie consumption per child during lunch was lower than the recommended calorie target and the range of calorie intake was substantial. Some children consumed too many calories at lunch while others consumed too few.
- Many non-CACFP centers did not provide lunch or any food at all, leaving it to parents. Parent-provided foods are not subject to licensing regulations.

“Our findings show clearly that participation in the CACFP program confers nutritional benefits to preschoolers,” Andreyeva said. “We encourage all eligible Connecticut child care centers to join CACFP so they can receive reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks served to children while children get access to healthier foods.”

Support for this research was provided by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and Healthy Eating Research, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Study co-authors include Erica Kenney of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Meghan O'Connell of the Yale School of Nursing, Xiaohan Sun of the University of Connecticut's Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, and Kathryn Henderson of Henderson Consulting in Guilford, CT.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

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