

Accommodating Special Diets

Sometimes children in your child care program will have special dietary requirements. Food allergies, cultural and religious preferences, and vegetarian diets are common issues in a child care program.

Guidelines for Handling Food Allergies

Food allergies are not uncommon. Cow's milk is a problem for some infants and young children. Other common sources of allergic reactions are wheat products, nuts, and eggs. Some young children have trouble with high fiber foods. Allergic reactions range from mild skin sensitivity to very severe symptoms. Because food allergies can be dangerous, or even life-threatening in extreme cases, it's important for child care providers to be aware of any allergies in the children within their care group. Here are some guidelines for managing food allergies in a child care setting.

- **Discuss food plans and allergies with families when you first enroll each child.** Ask about the allergy, when it was first identified, the likely signs of an allergic reaction, and the degree of sensitivity.
- **Prepare for reactions.** Be sure to ask parents how an allergic reaction should be treated. Some allergic reactions require immediate emergency medical treatment; others that are milder may be treated with over-the-counter medications. Ask parents to leave written instructions about how to handle an allergic reaction to specific foods.
- **Know your ingredients.** Be careful not to serve a food containing specific ingredients to children who are allergic. Some children who are allergic to certain foods may not be able to tolerate even the smallest amount used as an ingredient in other foods.
- **Recognize that dietary supplements sometimes will be needed.** There are health conditions such as anemia or diabetes that may be treated with a special diet or dietary supplements. You need to know about these problems and follow medical recommendations. Rely on parents to explain the routines and food needs, but get parents' permission to call a physician or dietitian when you have questions.



Cultural or Religious Beliefs and Food

Occasionally, a family's religious beliefs will prohibit or demand certain foods or foods at certain times. You should be informed about these special practices and be prepared for them. Knowing families' practices will help you accommodate their preferences in your child care program. Families also may request certain foods that reflect their cultural background. You may want to include some of these foods in your menus. Eating familiar foods will help children feel that they belong. Other children in your child care program also may be interested in eating new foods, especially if you explain a little about the cultural background or practices. You can also have a parent bring food, or lead the children in preparing a special food. Your local librarian may be able to help you locate children's books or cookbooks with pictures to share with children to help them understand about foods from different cultures.

Vegetarian Diets

Families who follow a vegetarian diet may request that you alter meal patterns for their children. Vegetarian diets vary from family to family. Some children may eat poultry and fish but avoid red meat. Others may avoid all meats but eat dairy products and eggs. Still others may avoid eating all animal-based products.

Talk with Parents about Special Dietary Needs

It is a good idea to post weekly menus so all parents will be aware of the meals you plan to offer. Ask parents about food needs and family eating patterns when you enroll their child in your child care program. Decide whether or not you can fulfill a particular child's special food needs before you agree to enroll that child in your program. If you cannot provide foods to meet the child's needs, consider asking the parents to provide meals and snacks that meet their child's needs, or refer the parents to another child care program that can better accommodate their child's dietary needs.