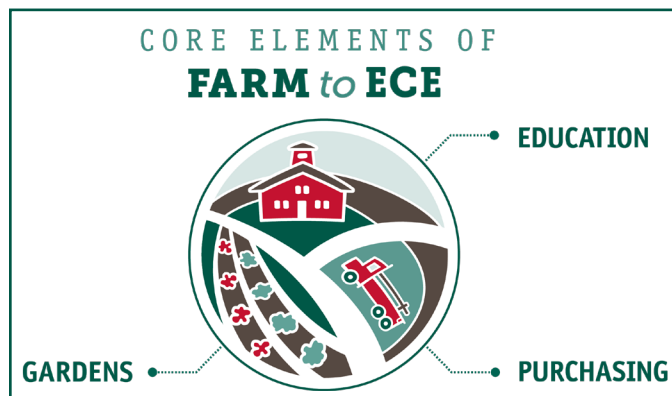


# The Significance of Farm to Early Care and Education in the Context of COVID-19

Communities across the country are navigating a crisis that has laid bare the inequities in our food and early care and education (ECE) systems. ECE providers are struggling to maintain their livelihoods while still trying to provide families and young children nurturing support. At the same time, providers and families may not have access to healthy food amidst the crisis. Now, more than ever, farm to ECE, including the core elements of food and agriculture education, gardening, and local food purchasing, can benefit children, families, and providers. It can promote long-term equity and resiliency in our communities and shared food system.

As always, farm to ECE is a tool to meet the goals, vision, and values of an ECE. Included here are reasons farm to ECE is even more relevant during a pandemic and a post-pandemic world in supporting providers in meeting the needs of children and families. This information can provide talking points and help you connect to interested providers, families, communities, and stakeholders to help build or rebuild farm to ECE initiatives and activities.



Education, gardening and local purchasing help young minds appreciate, understand, and value our food system. Farm to ECE can open children up to new foods and vegetables, as well as teach basic math, science, and biology concepts, and support the local food system.

**In addition during the outbreak and recovery period, it can provide opportunities for...**

## Education:

**Learning Outside** - Being outside is an easier setting for physical distancing and a calming environment.

**Learning Experientially** - Learning about growing food can be hands on, and offer cognitive benefits and stress release.

**Learning How Food Grows** - Reinforcing where food comes from is valuable in a time when many are even further removed from food sources, due to increased packaged foods, online shopping, and food delivery.

**Learning About Impacts on the Natural World** - Understanding how less human movement during the outbreak impacted the natural world can be shared with children. Share how this change in movement benefitted farms and food because of air and soil quality improvements, and increased animal and insect activity.

**Learning About Growing** - Learning about growth and renewal builds optimism and positivity, and it is distinct from illness and outbreaks.

**Learning that Supports States' Systems** - Farm to ECE learning often supports different state quality rating systems, as well as meeting Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and Infants and Toddlers (ITERS) guidelines.

## Gardening:

**Growing Self-Reliance** - Educators can find gratification in teaching and sharing activities of self-reliance for their staff, families, and children.

**Growing Certainty** - While much of the world seems uncertain, the natural world continues to reliably flourish. Seeds will sprout, plants will grow, and children can be a part of that natural cycle.

**Growing with Space** - Working an outdoor garden creates space for physical distancing.

**Growing Wellbeing** - Children and adults refresh and rejuvenate outside. Gardens provide opportunities for creativity and mental focus.

## Farm to ECE in Action

**Sonflower Seeds Christian Preschool and Learning Center** in Silk Hope, NC has cared for children for 15 years. Though the number of children at the center has decreased during the COVID-19 outbreak, Sonflower Seeds continues to serve children of essential workers. Heidi Lineberry, Director of Sonflower, believes serving nutritious local foods is part of caring for the “whole child,” which is more vital than ever. “So much of children’s time is spent eating, why not make the quality of the food a priority?” says Heidi. During the outbreak, sourcing food from local farmers, as well as having a garden on site, has ensured reliable availability of products, even as other sites in the area struggled to find certain foods. Sonflower participates in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and according to Heidi, monthly CACFP reimbursement more than covers the costs of local foods. Learn more about how Heidi supports local producers while serving nutritious meals to children here.

**Little Ones Learning Center** in Forest Park, GA, prioritizes connecting children and staff to locally-grown foods. During the pandemic, Little Ones continues to serve children of frontline workers while many of their other children remain at home. The center has found ways to keep children learning about where food comes from through safely distanced activities on-site and virtual learning opportunities. “Funtastic Friday” is a virtual bingo session dedicated to introducing children, at the school and at home, to the Harvest of the Month food item. Educators, children, and families are encouraged to try new recipes with local ingredients on “Tasty Tuesday”. Stacie McQuagge, Little Ones Farm to ECE Educator, says, “Farm to ECE is important before and after COVID-19, particularly in knowing where food comes from. If the kids go to the grocery store and see there is no food, they know that farmers are working overtime to get food to the grocery stores.” While many concerns about COVID-19’s impact on families and staff remain, Little Ones commitment to serving the child, family, and greater community through farm to ECE will sustain.

**Growing Equitable Access** - On-site gardens can be an important source of fresh food, not only for children, but for families and ECE staff.

**Growing Purpose and Belonging** - Both adults and children can feel valued and purposeful when cultivating a garden.

**Growing Standards-Aligned Learning** - Learning across domains is easily accomplished in the garden, as is the development of motor, social, cognitive, and emotional skills.

## Local Food Purchasing/Procurement:

**Supporting Local Producers and Economies** - Supporting producers and local food economies during difficult times helps your area and keeps money in the community.

**Supporting Reliability** - While disruptions in global supply chains may temporarily reduce food availability and increase costs, local food chains may be more reliable and consistent.

**Supporting a Sense of Safety** - Connecting children and families to those producing their food can make them feel safe and confident in their food options.

**Supporting Easier Food System Connections** - Changes in the supply chain, have pushed many food producers to look locally for buyers. More local, smaller farms are selling directly to customers, and many farmers and farmers markets are offering online purchasing to help connect producers to consumers.

## Additional Resources:

- [Association of State Public Health Nutritionists COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [Farm to School/ECE and COVID-19 Information Hub](#)
- [National Farm to School Network COVID-19 Resources for Farm to Early Care and Education](#)
- [Farm to ECE - Family Friendly and Physical Distancing Activities](#)

This publication is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of cooperative agreement number NU38OT000279-02. The specific project funded through this cooperative agreement (ASPHN Obesity Mini CoIIN: Farm to Early Care and Education) totals \$125,000 with 100 percent funded by the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity/National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion/CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, DNPAO/NCCDPHP/CDC/HHS, or the U.S. Government.



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