It’s National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month!

Though it has recently declined in preschool-aged children, childhood obesity still affects 1 in 5 children in the US. In 2011-2012, the rate of obesity in 2 to 5 year olds was 8.4%, 17.7% in 6-11 year olds, and 20.5% in 12-19 year olds.

Childhood obesity is also more common among certain racial and ethnic groups. Check out your state’s childhood obesity rates by visiting the CDC Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity: Data, Trends and Maps online tool: http://nccd.cdc.gov/NPAO_DTM/Default.aspx

Engaging Families in Early Care and Education

“Raising the next generation is a shared responsibility.” Family engagement is a vital part of every stage of child and adolescent development, but is especially critical in the early years when important life-long habits begin to develop. The early care and education (ECE) setting provides an opportunity for implementing family engagement strategies that facilitate positive interactions between program staff and parents. Given that parents and families are often the child’s first teacher, ECE providers should consider building meaningful partnerships with parents to provide positive support for children in these programs.

There are many different and creative examples that providers can use to connect with families and reinforce positive engagement. Of note, the National Association of the Education of Young Children recommends six major family engagement principles that should be used in provider programs. These include:

1. Programs invite families to participate in decision making and goal setting for their child.
2. Teachers and programs engage families in two-way communication.
3. Programs and teachers engage families in ways that are truly reciprocal.
4. Programs provide learning activities for the home and in the community.
5. Programs invite families to participate in program level decisions and wider advocacy efforts.
6. Programs implement a comprehensive program-level system of family engagement.
Healthy Habits Start Early!
Share these great tips provided by the Head Start National Center on Health on how to to create a healthier environment at home:

- Families can offer their child healthy snacks like small cubes of cheese, slices of bananas or whole grain crackers two to three times per day.

- Parents and families should model healthy eating habits for their children.

- Families should keep their kitchen stocked with simple, healthy snacks like carrots, sliced apples and peanut butter or string cheese.

- Families should let children participate in making healthy meals and snacks; this increases the likelihood of the child trying healthy foods if they help out.

- Increase your child’s intake of milk and water. Soda pop, 100% fruit juice and sport drinks add extra calories to a child’s diet and can harm their teeth.

- Help your child stay active by spending time outdoors, and decrease screen time.

Engaging families and parents can impact the nutrition and healthy development of a child. In a cross-sectional study on the factors associated with the implementation of healthy eating and physical activity in Australia, it was suggested that parents represent a particularly important group to garner support to achieve change in early childhood education and care services. Not only can family engagement influence school readiness and healthy nutritional development, but research shows that it can have positive influences on social and emotional development as well. These benefits point to family engagement as a responsibility of staff and families; working in partnership can help our children start on an early path to healthy development. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently released recommendations for families on how to integrate healthy eating and physical activities into everyday life:

- Buy fewer sugar sweetened beverages.

- Healthy foods and beverages should be readily accessible and in plain sight on the kitchen table or counter, or in the front of the shelf in the refrigerator.

- High-calorie foods should be less visible - wrapped in foil rather than clear wrap, and placed in the back of the fridge or pantry.

- Encourage children to eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

- Families should participate in physical activities for at least 60 minutes a day.

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