Childcare Providers Learn Strategies for Nutritious Eating

**The Challenge:** Early childhood represents a critical period for developing diet and activity behaviors that continue into adulthood; however, a child’s parents and home often are not the only influences over his/her nutrition environment. Nearly 60 percent of children 3 to 4 years old with employed mothers participate in center-based childcare, and 41 percent of preschool-age children are in early care and education (ECE) for 35 or more hours per week. Children consume between 50 percent and 100 percent of their food during this time.

Obesity rates are increasing among children at earlier ages. ECE settings can influence children’s eating and activity habits and should be considered as opportunities for preventing obesity. Most childcare facilities are regulated by state laws; therefore, changing policies that affect these facilities has the potential for improving children’s nutrition and activity environments.

**Project Goals:** The purpose of this project is to develop a curriculum based on the Healthy Bites resource guide, which offers strategies for improving nutrition and for preventing and remediating childhood obesity. Partners include the Celebrate Children Foundation, Wisconsin Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Initiative, Supporting Families Together Association, Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, UW-Madison faculty members and Wisconsin Departments of Children and Families, Public Instruction and Health Services.

Project goals are to produce a Healthy Bites nutrition curriculum, pilot the curriculum and training with ECE providers, and train regional technical consultants/trainers for statewide dissemination and implementation.

**Results:** The Healthy Bites curriculum pilot project implemented all of the goals in the application and addressed the following issues of importance to ECE providers:

- Selecting, purchasing and preparing safe, healthy, nutrient-rich locally grown foods
- Institutionalizing safe food handling, feeding and nutrition policies
- Discussing access and affordability issues in disparate center environments
- Supporting and strengthening strategies such as breastfeeding, on-site gardens and parental engagement

Findings from this project will guide future collaborations for expanding Healthy Bites training; instituting ECE garden-based learning, fresh food production and consumption; establishing cost-effective delivery of nutritious foods, including an affordable and accessible farm-to-preschool system; and providing evidence for science-based improvement in statewide nutrition policies for early care education.