

# Accommodating Special Diets in Child Care

Some children in child care have special dietary requirements. Food allergies, cultural and religious preferences, and vegetarian diets are common issues in a child care program. Child care providers, center directors, and parents need to work together in order to ensure that children with special dietary needs receive appropriate foods.

## TALK WITH PARENTS ABOUT SPECIAL DIETARY NEEDS

Planning to accommodate a child's special dietary needs should begin before that child is enrolled in the child care program. The program director or child care provider should ask parents about food needs and family eating patterns before enrolling their child in the child care program. Decide whether or not the program can provide the foods that meet the child's special dietary needs before agreeing to enroll that child in the child care program. If the program cannot provide foods to meet the child's needs, ask the parents to provide meals and snacks that meet their child's needs, or refer the family to another child care program that can better accommodate their child's special diet.



## GUIDELINES TO HELP CHILD CARE PROVIDERS HANDLE FOOD ALLERGIES

**Discuss 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 allergic 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. Have parents leave written instructions about how to handle an allergic reaction to specific foods.

**Check labels carefully, and pay attention to ingredients that may cause allergic reactions.** Be careful not to serve a food containing a certain ingredient to children who are allergic to that food. 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.

**Avoid cross-contamination.** Some children have such severe food allergies that indirect exposure can cause allergic reactions. A child with a peanut allergy may have a reaction if you spread jelly on his sandwich with a knife that has been used to spread peanut butter, even if you rinse the knife first. Be sure to wash all tools and food preparation surfaces carefully, and avoid reusing tools that have touched an allergen until they have been washed with hot water and soap and sanitized. If you have prepared food that contains an



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allergen, wash your hands carefully with soap and warm water before touching the child with an allergy.

**Consider prohibiting certain foods from the child care program.** Some children have life-threatening allergies to certain foods. If a child's allergy is severe, or there are several children with the same food allergy, consider prohibiting that food in the child care setting to avoid the risk of allergic reactions. Many child care programs do not allow peanuts or tree nuts, because allergies to those foods can be severe or even life-threatening.

## CULTURAL OR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FOOD PREFERENCES

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Occasionally, a family's religious beliefs will prohibit or demand certain foods or foods at certain times. When you talk with parents before enrolling the child, ask about these special practices, and discuss with the parents the best ways to accommodate these dietary changes. 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. Consider including some of these foods in your weekly menus, both to help children from that culture feel more comfortable, and to introduce other children in the child care program to these foods that are part of their classmate's culture. If children are old enough to understand, explain what these foods are, and tell them a little about the cultural background or practices that include the foods. 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. Parents may also be willing to bring foods from their culture or to help the children prepare a new food. Including foods from different cultures as a regular part of your menus, instead of a "special" food served only on certain days, is a more effective way to help children learn about foods eaten in different cultures.

## VEGETARIAN DIETS

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Families who follow a vegetarian diet may request that vegetarian meals 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. Child care providers and directors should discuss the specific vegetarian diet with the parents, and decide how to accommodate the child's needs. If the menus cannot be changed completely, you may be able to make some substitutions for children who do not eat meat or other animal products.

## APEC IS HERE TO HELP

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APEC provides free training, information, and consultation to families. Visit our training calendar for more information about learning opportunities at [www.alabamaparentcenter.com](http://www.alabamaparentcenter.com) or call our center.

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