

Farm to Child Care: A Detailed Guide for Farmers and Food Producers



Information for farmers and food producers interested in selling their products to child care programs in Wisconsin and beyond

What is Farm to Child Care/Early Care and Education?

Farm to Child Care, also called Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE), is about teaching young children where their food comes from and building their confidence to grow, select, and prepare their own fresh food. It is about celebrating our connections through food to nature, our cultures and identities, and to each other. **Farm to ECE brings together children, teachers, families, staff, and local farmers and food producers in a wide network of support.**

As we learned through our 2017 and 2020 Wisconsin Farm to ECE Surveys, Farm to ECE concepts are catching on. Early care and education (ECE) programs are **increasingly connecting with local farms and food producers** to

purchase local foods for their meals and snacks. In both surveys, roughly 75% of the programs that responded indicated they were incorporating local foods into meals, snacks, and educational activities.

This resource contains detailed information to help you better understand these new potential partners and marketing opportunities!



Table of Contents

What is Early Care and Education and how is it different from K-12?.....	2
Food Purchasing at ECE Programs	4
Opportunities and Challenges in Farm to ECE for Providers.....	5
Opportunities and Challenges in Farm to ECE for Farmers and Food Producers.....	6
Finding Local Early Care and Education Providers.....	7
Prepare Your Business.....	8
Building Relationships.....	8
Farm to ECE Success Story.....	10
Join the Farm to ECE Community.....	11

What is Early Care & Education and How is it Different from K-12?

Early Care and Education refers to child care programs for children age birth to five years old. Children older than 5 years old are generally referred to as “school-age.” Some ECE sites will host after-school and summer programs for school-age children, and some ECE programs are housed in K-12 schools.

There are **some important differences between child care programs and K-12 schools:**

- Most ECE programs **operate year-round** making them great partners for the entire growing season. ECE providers are often interested in fresh fruits and vegetables, but may also be looking for local dairy, eggs, meat, honey, or value-added products.
- At this age, children are not usually bussed to the site, and parents are actively dropping off and picking up the children. This allows for **more family interaction opportunities**, such as a possible pop-up market or CSA pick-up location.
- Also at this age, **hands-on learning** is the norm, making the availability of fresh produce a great learning tool for cooking and educational activities. This edible education helps to start young children off with great healthy eating habits.
- Related to this, the ages 0 to 5 are a crucial time for physical and emotional development. **ECE professionals are trained in and aware of how important good nutrition is** for healthy brain and body development, paving the way for future health.



Every day, ECE sites need to supply fruit and veggie snacks for their kids: a perfect opportunity for local apples!

- **Farm to ECE addresses social and racial equity.** While in care, children may eat multiple meals and snacks, and some children are in care for the majority of the day, five or more days/week. We know for families that are struggling economically, these meals and snacks are a crucial source of quality calories for the children. Farm to ECE also connects us as humans to diverse food stories, histories, and cultures and can be a means of sharing and instilling pride in who we are and where we come from.
- ECE programs will usually be smaller than K-12 schools, but have a **range of sizes** which can match with the variety of sizes of small-scale farms. ECE programs also often have **more autonomy** than K12 programs in food purchasing.

There are a few different types of ECE programs. Their food service needs will vary based on the size of the center and their purchasing guidelines.

- **Family Child Care Providers** - usually provided in the home for a small number of children (8 or fewer). In-home care providers constitute a large part of ECE programs and are common throughout the state. In communities of color, tribal communities, rural areas, and low-income communities this is likely to be the only form of child care available. Their purchasing patterns are different from larger centers, and they are great partners for CSAs, delivery, and farmers' markets.
- **Group Child Care Centers** - serve larger groups of children (from 9 to 100+) and may have multiple classes for different ECE age groups. These programs may be small businesses, nonprofits, or larger corporate programs. Note that the corporate programs (like La Petite Academy, KinderCare, etc) often have their menus decided at the corporate level. They may not be able to purchase food for meals locally, but might be able to purchase items or a CSA for educational purposes.
- **Head Start/Early Head Start** - Head Start is a Federal program that promotes school readiness for children ages 3 to 5 from low-income families. Early Head Start serves infants, toddlers, and expecting families who are low-income. Farm to ECE can help Head Start programs achieve many of their goals. See this [resource](#) for more information.
- **Preschools** - preschool is a general term that applies to children 2-5 years old. Preschools may be operated by private companies, nonprofits, religious organizations, or public school systems.
- **4K and programs in school districts** - "4K" refers to 4-year old kindergarten. These may be housed at public schools, or school districts may partner with private child care centers to host the 4K program there.



Young learners love engaging with growers, and markets provide an excellent venue for connecting with care teams and families.

Food Purchasing at ECE Programs

Although programs must comply with certain state and federal regulations around nutrition and learning, each program is unique in size, staffing, facilities, curriculum, philosophy, and menus.

Most providers have the flexibility to adopt farm to ECE practices that best suit their needs.



Children love to eat carrots when the greens are left on top!

If purchasing local and/or fresh foods is new to an ECE site, **going slow** and starting with just an occasional item or two over the growing season might be a great way to start a relationship and for the ECE program to build confidence. Providers are often very overwhelmed given the important work that they do, the regulations and paperwork involved, and the demands on their time and energy to meet every child and family's needs. They are often overworked and underpaid (something farmers and food producers can relate to!). While the provider may have a strong desire to participate in farm to ECE, keeping the pressure low is key to starting and sustaining a fruitful relationship.

Depending on their comfort level, some ECE programs, especially family or smaller group care providers, may be interested in a CSA share to use in food service and as an educational tool. Kids love to help unpack the weekly boxes and see what is inside! See "[Community Supported Agriculture \(CSA\) and Your Early Care and Education Program](#)" for more information on why this can be a great match. The ability to offer CSA memberships to the families whose children attend the program can greatly enhance the economic return for farmers who deliver to these programs, which can double as a pick-up site for the families.

Some larger centers may be interested in purchasing just **a few items in greater quantities**, similar to a restaurant procurement. If a program is part of a chain or is hosted in a school system, they may have more formal processes for connecting with new vendors. You may need to speak with the food service manager to find out more about their purchasing process.

ECE programs may participate in the **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** (similar to the USDA National School Lunch Program for K12 schools). CACFP reimburses centers for eligible meals and snacks served to enrolled children, targeting benefits to those children most in need.

Local food purchasing has been encouraged by the CACFP as outlined in the [Local Foods in the Child and Adult Care Food Program Memo](#) and [Local Meats and Eggs in CACFP Memo](#). If a program uses the CACFP, they will **need documentation** from vendors to receive reimbursement. A simple written receipt or invoice will suffice. Be sure it includes the **date of purchase, name of vendor/farmer, cost of the item, amount purchased, and the total cost**.

Some state governments are providing **extra financial incentives** for schools and child care programs to purchase local foods. For example, [10 Cents a Meal for Michigan's Kids and Farms](#) is a state-funded program that matches what schools and early childhood programs spend on Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes with grants up to 10 cents per meal. However, no program like this exists in Wisconsin yet as of this writing.

Opportunities and Challenges in Farm to ECE for Providers

In our [Wisconsin Farm to ECE surveys](#), we learned that the top reasons child care centers participate in farm to ECE are to **improve children's knowledge** of where food comes from and to **improve children's overall health**. We know that a connection to a local food source and the farmer/food producer can definitely accomplish these goals.

Our surveys show the greatest challenge for ECE providers, especially for providers preparing meals on-site, is the **capacity to actually purchase local foods**. In many cases providers drive personal vehicles to purchase food and supplies at grocery stores or other retail outlets. Many report this process consumes significant amounts of their time, and they are often unable to seek out specialty or local items. **It is key to develop successful models that bring local foods directly to the ECE site, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, farmer or food hub deliveries, working with existing distributors, etc.**

There is also an opportunity to educate ECE providers on the **affordability of local produce**, especially when purchased in season. Unlike K-12 schools, ECE programs operate year-round and can take advantage of peak season pricing on just about every locally grown food.

Additional barriers for providers can include a **lack of kitchen equipment, or even a formal kitchen space, or a lack of staff knowledge or time for processing fresh foods**. See the resource "[Fresh Produce Recipes for Microwave and Toaster Oven](#)" for ideas to suggest on cooking fresh, local foods without a formal kitchen.

Remember, like farmers, ECE providers are often fellow small business owners who are subject to the challenges that all small business owners face. **Collaborations can help make all partners stronger.**

Opportunities and Challenges in Farm to ECE for Farmers and Food Producers

Farm to ECE provides an opportunity to grow fresh, healthy food for the youngest, and most vulnerable in our communities while providing a rewarding personal connection. Young children can really appreciate farmers and food producers as the heroes they are!

Child care programs may only need small quantities of food due to small serving sizes for young children. However, the ability to have a **pop-up market** or **CSA pick-up site** at a child care program helps make the relationship more economically viable for a farmer.

Not all foods are safe for young children or may take some extra preparation to make them safe, for example cherries are a choking hazard for little eaters, or carrots may need to be shredded for 2-3 year olds. Here are some examples of **commonly requested fruits and vegetables at ECE sites**:

Apples	Beets	Lettuce and salad greens
Melons	Broccoli	Sweet peppers
Pears	Carrots	Tomatoes (cherry and slicing)
Raspberries	Cucumbers (slicing and pickling)	Snap and shelling peas
Strawberries	Green beans	Zucchini

Many other foods may be requested/acceptable especially if the program does scratch cooking or can do some food prep. Also be sure to inquire whether there are any **crops or foods of cultural significance** for the families in the program that you might be able to grow or produce.

When larger quantities of food can be purchased, it can be beneficial to have a [local food hub](#) coordinating product orders and deliveries/pick-ups between food producers and the ECE programs. However, this can separate some of the personal connection between programs and growers and large volume purchases are often necessary to make this economically viable for the food hub or local distributor. This presents an opportunity for **creative purchasing**. For example, a group of providers may be able to make a bulk purchase of food items together, reducing the cost for all.

Like farms, childcare businesses can come and go. Many were forced to close due to complications around the COVID pandemic, but federal and state funds are being directed towards supporting **childcare recovery**.

Finding Local Early Care and Education Providers



Finding local ECE providers can be as simple as doing an internet search. However, not all will have an on-line presence. **Most state governments have a department that maintains a list of regulated/licensed providers.** In Wisconsin, see the [WI Department of Children and Families web page](#). Or try an internet search with your state name and the words “child care” to find your state agency.

Another way to find ECE programs is through your regional **Child Care Resource and Referral agency (CCR&R)**. They can help determine which programs might already be connected with growers or who might be receptive to working with one. They might also have ways to educate child care providers about what you have to offer - for example, opportunities to speak with providers at CCR&R hosted trainings. Find information on CCR&R's in Wisconsin [here](#).

Many children are also in “Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care”. This refers to home-based care that is not required to be regulated by the state. Ask friends with young children in care who their provider is -- a personal “in” always provides an easier and quicker connection.

If your business goals include serving child care programs run by and/or serving low-income/marginalized children and families there are a couple of indicators that can help you identify these programs. In Wisconsin, one measure of economic need of families is whether they qualify for Wisconsin Shares, the **child care subsidy program** (other states have similar programs). Childcare programs will be able to tell you if they serve children that use Wisconsin Shares and what percentage of their children qualify.

Most states also have a **Quality Rating Improvement System** (in Wisconsin this is called YoungStar). A lower rating can indicate the need for more community support. These programs likely qualify for federal funds to help with food purchasing.

The majority of childcare workers are women, and many are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). This provides a good opportunity for farmers within those communities to make connections with providers who share their identities/community/experiences. Note that if you are not from one of these populations/communities, you will need to take time to build relationships and be open to deep listening to be certain that **their** needs are being served.

Prepare Your Business

Once you have found potential childcare providers you'd like to work with, think about what you are willing or able to offer based on your business goals. Here are some considerations:

- How will you clearly communicate your product **pricing, quantities, and availability** throughout the year?
- Will you offer **delivery**? If so, would there be a minimum order or fee for this? Delivery is really helpful for providers, but if you can't deliver, are you willing to work out an accommodation - like pick-up at your CSA pick-up site or farmers' market booth?
- Consider whether the ECE site may make a good **CSA pickup or mini-market location** for families.
- Ensure you meet **licensing and labeling requirements** for all products you grow and sell.
- Be prepared to share your **food safety and liability insurance documentation**. Programs vary greatly in food safety documentation requirements. Government-funded centers may have stricter requirements, but smaller centers have flexibility in working with small producers who choose not to pursue GAP and other certifications.
- What is your **policy for products of unacceptable quality** or if they are unavailable? Will you offer a substitute or a refund?
- **How will you want to be paid and how frequently?**

Consider whether or not you are willing to do a **classroom visit** (perhaps off-season) or have the children visit the farm. This is definitely not a requirement for working with ECE providers, and everyone must account for their time and energy, but it can be a rewarding experience.

Another option is to occasionally **open the delivery box with the children** present. They love to ask questions and will be excited to see what you have brought. **Moments like these can reinforce why these connections are meaningful** and give children a stronger sense of place and understanding of food systems.

Building Relationships

Now you are ready to make the initial contact! It's best to reach out via a **short call** since it can be hard for providers to take time and attention away from the children to talk longer. **The best time to call is usually between 1-3pm during nap time** or in the late afternoon or evening



after children have gone home for the day for home-based providers. For your introductory information, just give a couple of quick sentences about how you are a local grower and interested in providing fresh, healthy foods to the young children of your community. Ask if there would be a good time to chat further or to meet in person to tell them more.

At your follow-up meeting, introduce yourself and your farm, including your primary crops and growing techniques. Bring samples if you can. Explain your interest in working with Early Care and Education providers and **what draws you to these potential customers**. The shared feeling of caring about the health of young children is a great foundation on which to build this relationship! **Selling points that would appeal to early childhood providers** include the freshness of the food, because when food looks and tastes great, the children are more willing to try it and eat it. Food with reduced levels of pesticides or hormones is also important to this audience.

Ask them details about their program and their needs:

- **How many children** do they serve on a daily basis?
- What products do they currently use that can be **easily substituted** with a local variety?
- Are there specific foods that they would be interested in that **reflect the culture of the families** the program serves?
- Would the program be interested in purchasing in **bulk or cosmetically imperfect seconds**?
- What **equipment** do they have available to process ingredients?
- What are their **delivery needs**, including number of deliveries, packing requirements, and on-site storage options? Is there a particular day of the week that they would like delivery or to pick-up?
- If this option works for you, ask if they would be interested in farmer-in-the-classroom visits or farm field trips.
- How frequently will you communicate and how (email, text, phone calls)?

After getting to know their program and food service needs, discuss which of your products would be a good match for them. Emphasize the **cost effectiveness of in-season foods**, especially when



purchased in bulk, or the cost comparison for organic vegetables in a CSA share vs. buying them individually at a store. Know what you are able to offer if they ask about discounts or be prepared to brainstorm on how they can fund purchases from you. For example, some farmers promote their CSA shares to the families of a child care center, and for every family that signs up, the child care center receives an incremental discount on their share.

Farm to ECE Success Story

Angie Wells, the director of Coulee Children's Center (CCC) in La Crosse, WI shared her success story in building farmer connections with her ECE program. CCC is a nonprofit childcare center that serves from 90 to 120 children, infants to school age, year-round. They were able to connect with Old Oak Family Farms through a Farm to ECE grant program with Kids Forward and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in the fall of 2017. Their center staff had always been passionate about gardening with the kids, and they were glad to have even more fresh produce available for meals and taste tests. Having a CSA delivered right to their center created excitement for both kids and families to learn about new veggies each week, and CCC would often send home extra veggies at pickup time.

The kids also loved getting to know their farmer. Angie says, "Farmer Kyle was awesome because she wasn't the stereotypical old man with a pitchfork that we typically see in early childhood literature. It was really eye opening for our kiddos to see things outside of old school gender norms." Teachers also noted that kids were much more likely to try new vegetables when they knew they had been grown by Farmer Kyle. Having a personal connection to their food inspired kids to try new veggies more often! Though most centers don't have the budget to reimburse farmers for classroom visits, CCC is able to promote their partner farmers by sharing weekly CSA photos on social media and with parents, giving them some great promotion to caregivers and friends.

The most challenging parts of sourcing local food for CCC have been overcoming limited supply chains. Even though they live in Wisconsin, they've struggled to find dairy products directly from the farmer. Price can also be a barrier, especially when looking for locally and sustainably grown meat for 100 kids. Their program needs much larger grocery orders than a family center, but they are still too small to be competitive for many wholesale orders.

Some of the most important things that CCC had looked for in their farmer connection were:

- Ability to deliver directly to their site.
- Kid-friendly produce like cherry tomatoes, peppers, carrots, and peas.
- Fruits were a big plus! Young eaters love getting to share watermelon in the summer.
- Interest in visiting with young children, and familiarity with that age group's educational needs -- you'll get lots of "why?" and "how?" questions from 3-5 year olds.

As a reminder, child care programs might need to take local purchasing in small steps if they are new to using fresh and local foods. Below is an illustration of a possible farm to ECE continuum of purchasing:



Single purchases for special events might include the [Great Lakes Great Apple Crunch](#), the [Wisconsin Chili Lunch](#), or items for taste tests (different colored carrots or cherry tomatoes). The once/month purchases of a local item might be guided by the [Wisconsin Harvest of the Month or Harvest of the Moon](#) materials.

And, as deliveries are made or pick-ups proceed, and especially if classroom or farm visits are possible, the relationship between the farmer/food producer and the ECE provider, children, and families grows as well.

Join the Farm to ECE Community

We hope that you will consider working with child care programs as part of your farm or food production business plan. If you do, **know that you have a community of support to help you.**

Many states have stakeholder networks around farm to ECE. The **Wisconsin Farm to ECE Workgroup** is a partnership of people and organizations throughout Wisconsin who have an interest in furthering farm to ECE. It includes child care providers, state agency representatives, nutrition educators, non-profits, farmers, and more. The Wisconsin workgroup meets quarterly, usually via Zoom. To get on the email list or to get connected to a network in your state - contact wifarmtoece@rootedwi.org

Wisconsin's "**Growing Together**" newsletter is published once or twice a month. It has information on everything related to farm to school, farm to ECE, and school gardens including new resources, grants, and the latest news. You can sign up at this link: <http://eepurl.com/cCo3qz>

To learn more and for other examples of farmers working with child care programs see:

- [WEESN + Parenting Place + Local Farmers = New Farm to ECE Purchasing Pilot for Child Care Providers](#) - from Wisconsin Early Childhood Association
- [Growing Opportunities: Farm to School Benefits for Farmers and Producers](#) - webinar from the National Farm to School Network
- [Growing Head Start Success with Farm to ECE](#) - from the National Farm to School Network
- [Farm to HeadStart in Minnesota: Planting the Seeds for a Community-centered Food System](#) - from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
- [Farm to Early Childhood Programs: A Step-by-Step Guide](#) - from Michigan Farm to School

Questions? Comments? Get in touch!

Contact our Farm to ECE team at wifarmtoece@rootedwi.org. Visit our website at rootedwi.org for more Wisconsin Farm to ECE resources to share with providers.

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***And thank you** for your interest in feeding our youngest children the best, healthiest, most delicious food around!*

