Set aside a time and place to plan menus for at least a week at a time. Have your menus planned before the food is purchased. These four steps will help ensure you have planned menus that meet the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) requirements for reimbursable meals.

1. Plan menus that meet the CACFP Meal Pattern requirements for the age groups of children you serve.

2. Plan the main dish first (meat or a meat alternate). The main dish may also contain pasta, rice, or vegetables.

3. Plan foods to go with the main dish to meet the remainder of the CACFP Meal Pattern requirements (fruit/vegetable, grains/breads, milk).

4. Include foods on the menu that are approved as creditable (reimbursable) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and your state agency.

Once the basic requirements of the meal pattern are met, check your menus for variety.

**Tips for Menu Planning**

Nutritious Menus

Variety

Foods with fiber, vitamins A and C, and iron

- Different
- Shapes
- Colors
- Textures
- Tastes

Flavor with herbs and spices

Likes and dislikes of children

Requests of parents
Plan Nutritious Menus
• Plan to serve a variety of foods during the day and week.
• Check that the same foods are not repeated more than once a week.
• Increase fiber by including fresh vegetables and fruits and whole-grain products.
• Include foods that provide vitamin A several times a week. Include foods high in vitamin C and iron each day.
• Limit the number of fried foods and high-fat foods offered.
• Limit the number of sweets such as cookies, cakes, brownies, and doughnuts to an occasional treat. These foods are not creditable (reimbursable) on the CACFP.
• Serve fewer high salt (sodium) foods such as luncheon meats and processed foods.

Plan Menus That Look and Taste Good
• Include different shapes—round, square, rectangular, and wedge-shaped.
• Include different colors—yellow, orange, red, bright green, purple/blue, white, tan, and brown. See CARE Connection lesson Vary Your Vegetables and Fruits for ideas.
• Include different textures—soft, fluffy, crunchy, crisp, creamy, and smooth.
• Include different tastes—sweet, sour, tart, salty, spicy, and mild.
• Look for ways to use herbs and spices in child care menus.
• Think about the likes and dislikes of the children.
• Consider special requests of parents.
• Include some foods in each meal that are easy to like.
• Introduce new foods along with familiar favorites.
• Plan menus that are right for the age of the children. Do not serve foods that could cause young children to choke.
Remember to take into account any food allergies that the children in your care may have. Modify menus as needed.

**Consider Cycle Menus**

A cycle menu is a series of menus planned for a period of time, for example, 4 weeks. The menu is different for each day during the cycle. After you serve the whole menu, you have completed the first cycle. The menus are then repeated in the same order. Because they turn over and start again, they are called a cycle menu.

Cycle menus save time, save money on groceries when purchases are well-planned, and ensure that the children will be offered a healthful variety of foods, including favorite meals and new foods.

*Menus for Child Care* cycle menus may be found on the NFSMI Web site at www.nfsmi.org