

# Y EARLY CHILDHOOD NUTRITION PROGRAMMING STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE FAMILIES

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# Introduction

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This report highlights how Ys engaged families to promote participation in early childhood nutrition programs through the two-year Early Childhood Nutrition Access and Education (ECNAE) pilot project. It also summarizes evidence from the literature for five key strategies used by Ys to engage families in early childhood nutrition programs.

## Background

In 2022, Y-USA received grant funding from the Walmart Foundation to support the two-year ECNAE pilot project. Funding was distributed to 14 Y subgrantees, and one additional Y received funding from another donor (Figure 1). The ECNAE pilot project aimed to explore strategies Ys can use to engage preschoolers and their families in nutrition programs and healthy eating.

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Figure 1: Ys Participating in Early Childhood Nutrition Access and Education (ECNAE) Project

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Participating Ys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Greater Valley YMCA**</li><li>■ Greater Susquehanna Valley YMCA</li><li>■ Greater Wyoming Valley Area YMCA</li><li>■ Hockomock Area YMCA</li><li>■ Merrimack Valley YMCA*</li><li>■ MetroWest YMCA</li><li>■ Monroe Family YMCA</li><li>■ La Crosse Area Family YMCA</li><li>■ YMCA of Central Massachusetts</li><li>■ YMCA of Greater Dayton</li><li>■ YMCA of Greater Louisville*</li><li>■ YMCA of Metropolitan Detroit</li><li>■ YMCA of Southern Nevada</li><li>■ YMCA of Southwest Florida</li><li>■ YMCA of Superior California</li></ul>

\* Participated only in first Harvest Session (January 2023)  
\*\* Participated only in second Harvest Session (November 2023)

Participating Ys implemented an evidence-based early childhood nutrition education curriculum of their choice to engage families. Most participating Ys implemented the [Coordinated Approach to Child Health \(CATCH\) Early Childhood program](#) or [Doctor Yum’s Preschool Food Adventure](#). The CATCH curriculum seeks to educate children ages 3 to 5 on physical activity, gardening, nutrition, and healthy eating through interactive classroom lessons and tips for caregivers. Doctor Yum’s Preschool Food Adventure is a two-year interactive and multi-sensory curriculum designed to

improve children’s relationships with healthy food. The Doctor Yum curriculum includes classroom lessons and teacher training, family-friendly recipes, storybooks, and additional resources for caregivers to use at home. Participating Ys reported on the types of nutrition education curricula, strategies to engage families, challenges, and successes.

## Methods

This report summarizes key findings from two in-person “Harvest Sessions,” where participating Ys convened to discuss progress, workshop challenges, and identify best practices related to their early childhood nutrition education programs. The first Harvest Session was held in Las Vegas, Nevada in January 2023, and the second Harvest Session was held in Chattanooga, Tennessee in November 2023. This report also includes findings from progress reports and supporting program documentation. A targeted literature review was conducted to assess the evidence base for strategies and best practices identified by the Ys.

## Overview of Family Engagement Strategies

Several factors contribute to early childhood nutrition, including community food access, how families engage with their child’s nutrition education, and how the child engages with food (Figure 2). This report focuses on strategies to engage families to promote participation in early childhood nutrition programs. Ys successfully engaged families using the following strategies:




- **Strategy 1:** Implement nutrition activities emphasizing caregiver participation to improve caregiver confidence in nutrition education and child acceptability of nutritious foods.
- **Strategy 2:** Share resources and materials with caregivers to reinforce nutrition education at home.
- **Strategy 3:** Communicate with caregivers consistently and through multiple modes to increase caregiver awareness of classroom policies and ongoing activities.
- **Strategy 4:** Provide safe spaces and opportunities for caregivers to ask questions, provide feedback, and engage with program staff to adapt nutrition activities.
- **Strategy 5:** Provide opportunities for caregivers to connect to strengthen peer networks, promote participation in nutrition programs, and encourage discussions outside of structured sessions.



Figure 2. Key Elements of Early Childhood Nutrition

This report highlights each of the strategies listed above and provides best practices and lessons learned identified by the ECNAE Ys along with research that supports the strategy.

Figure 3: Overview of Report Structure

Overview of Report Structure	
	<b>Strategy #X.</b> Strategy to improve family engagement in early childhood nutrition programs.
	<b>Ys in Practice.</b> Includes best practices and lessons learned for Strategy #X identified by Ys that participated in the ECNAE pilot project.
	<b>In the Research.</b> Includes results from a targeted literature review of Strategy #X.

# Strategies to Engage Families in Early Childhood Nutrition

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**Strategy 1:** Implement nutrition activities emphasizing caregiver participation to improve caregiver confidence in nutrition education and child acceptability of nutritious foods.

## Ys in Practice

Ys implemented the following programs and activities to encourage caregivers to engage in nutrition activities with their children:

- **Family Cooking Classes.** These classes provided opportunities for caregivers and children to learn cooking skills by preparing a healthy meal together. Ys reported success using child-friendly utensils that encouraged children to safely participate in cooking. For example, the Doctor Yum curriculum suggested using [Kuhn Rikon kid safe “dog knives.”](#)
- **Holiday Events and Meals.** Ys hosted events and meals around major holidays to bring families and children together. Many Ys offered family-style meals and encouraged children to serve themselves. Holiday events also provided opportunities for caregivers to speak with Y staff and each other.
- **Family Recipe Books.** Ys encouraged families to send in one of their favorite recipes. Ys compiled recipes from participating families to develop class recipe books, adapting recipes as needed to ensure they align with healthy food choices.
- **Taste Testing.** Some Ys noted it can be challenging to engage caregivers in promoting nutrition at home when caregivers are unaware of nutrition best practices. Ys recommended implementing activities that allowed caregivers to try new foods and exhibit positive role modeling for their kids. For example, one Y hosted Veggie Parties, where caregivers tried new vegetables with their children.



Participants at a Cooking with Littles Class at MetroWest YMCA.

© MetroWest YMCA

## Y Lessons Learned

- **Engage with families at least three times per topic or food to reinforce healthy eating concepts.**
- **Communicate with caregivers to understand the best times to hold events and activities.** Ys reported that preferred times varied (e.g., weekday mornings, weekday evenings, weekends). Some Ys suggested scheduling classroom activities involving caregivers near pick-up time to encourage participation.
- **Create a calendar of classroom activities and events well in advance** (e.g., for the entire school year) to provide ample time for caregivers to accommodate important dates. For example, the La Crosse Family Y reported participation increased from 60% to 90% with advanced notice.
- **Hold family activities and programs in multiple languages when possible.** For example, the YMCA of Southern Nevada saw an increase in participation when they offered cooking classes in both English and Spanish.
- **Use consistent administrative processes** (e.g., staff training) when planning and implementing programs, especially when operating multiple facilities. However, specific program activities and foods may need to be tailored based on participant preferences and center capacity.

## In the Research

**Many early childhood nutrition education programs have engaged caregivers through educational sessions or workshops to increase caregivers' nutrition knowledge.<sup>1-4</sup> There is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of parent engagement on early childhood nutrition outcomes.**

- In a systematic literature review of obesity prevention programs implemented at child care centers, 65% (n=13) of the interventions that included parents were considered effective.<sup>1</sup> These programs engaged parents through interest groups, educational sessions, and technical assistance from health providers. However, the authors noted that most interventions that did not include parents also effectively reached their aims. The authors suggested interpreting findings within the context of the complexity of multi-level interventions.
- One study evaluated a *Cooking with a Chef* program, which included weekly lessons with a chef and nutrition educator to teach caregivers (n=29) basic nutrition, food selection, cooking skills, and menu planning.<sup>2</sup> Children of caregivers involved in the study consumed more daily fruit servings after the program than before (although the findings were not statistically significant).
- Another study assessed a nutrition and exercise program in eight early childhood centers.<sup>3</sup> A total of 307 children ages 2 to 5 and their parents participated in the study. The program integrated healthy menu changes and family-based education, including educational dinner sessions with dietitians, monthly newsletters with educational information, and activities to continue at

home. Children who participated in the program consumed less junk food, ate more fresh fruits and vegetables, and drank more 1% milk than children in the control group.

- One evaluation of the Doctor Yum curriculum found that parents reported an increased understanding of the value of involving their children in preparing meals and an increased perception of their children's enjoyment of food.<sup>5</sup>

## FARMER'S MARKET SCAVENGER HUNT

- A vegetable that grows UNDERGROUND
- An IRREGULAR shaped vegetable or fruit
- A vegetable that you have NEVER SEEN before (find out it's name by asking the farmer)
- The BIGGEST vegetable you can find
- A food with edible SEEDS
- A food with edible LEAVES
- A food that you eat for BREAKFAST
- A RED food
- A food that grows on a VINE
- A DESSERT ingredient
- A food that grows on a TREE
- A BLUE food
- A food that comes in in 2 different VARIETIES
- An ingredient used to make PIZZA
- A food you can use to make a BEVERAGE



Did you find anything else that was interesting? What did you most want to taste?

**Other treasure hunts for the Farmer's Market!**

Find foods that are all different plant parts. (stem, bulb, root, leaves, fruit, seed, flower)

Try to find 3 foods you've never seen at the supermarket!

Try to find all of the colours of the rainbow!

**BONUS!**

Find a farm that is selling a product that they have made from vegetables or fruit that they grew! What is it made from?



Example take-home activity provided by MetroWest YMCA.

© Little Green Thumbs

## Strategy 2: Share resources and materials with caregivers to reinforce nutrition education at home.

### Ys in Practice

- Ys shared take-home resources with caregivers that aligned with lessons and foods from in-class activities, including recipes of the month, tips for caregivers, and activities to continue at home. Ys recommended asking caregivers for feedback on the resources to inform future planning and keep caregivers engaged in nutrition conversations.
- Ys reported success with distributing resources from the [Doctor Yum Project](#) with caregivers, such as the classroom storybooks on nutrition and the [Meal-o-matic](#). The Meal-o-matic is an interactive online tool that generates recipes based on ingredients and user preferences.

Y Lessons Learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ <b>Encourage children to share new information with their loved ones.</b> Ys perceived that children were more excited to learn and retained information better when they shared classroom lessons and meals at home with their families.</li><li>■ <b>Carefully consider caregiver needs when suggesting recipes and new foods.</b> Hockomock Area YMCA found that families were often interested in recipes for quick, healthy meals that worked within their schedules. The YMCA of Greater Dayton also had success getting families engaged when sending home familiar foods and recipes rather than introducing new ones.</li><li>■ <b>Assess resources for allowing children to take program materials home.</b> Some Ys noted challenges with getting take-home items back from caregivers (i.e., items and materials that are shared among the class).</li></ul>

### In the Research

**Several studies identified strategies for engaging families through materials and resources, such as homework assignments, newsletters, storybooks, and diet and exercise guidelines for preschool children.<sup>6-10</sup> Studies used a variety of resources and materials, often in tandem with other strategies (e.g., educational sessions), with mixed results on improving early childhood nutrition outcomes.**

- In a study of a family nutrition education program at 24 early childhood centers, parents were more likely to engage with take-home materials than in-person nutrition classes.<sup>9</sup> The study program included six 30–60-minute classes for caregivers, and each lesson was accompanied by take-home materials and activities. Twelve percent of caregivers in the study attended the nutrition class,

whereas 86% of caregivers reported they read at least some of weekly newsletters, which included at-home activities and recipes. Overall, the study found children's at-home consumption of vegetables and use of low-fat/fat-free milk increased after families participated in the program.

- The *Healthy & Ready to Learn* program aimed to engage children in the classroom and at home. The program included monthly training sessions for caregivers to teach them how to engage in activities with their children at home. The program provided children's books and other nutrition-related activities to complete with the parents' assistance. A study of 405 children participating in *Healthy & Ready to Learn* at Head Start centers reported improvements in child growth and development compared to controls.<sup>10</sup>
- Some evidence suggests storybooks are a promising practice for influencing children's nutrition.<sup>7,8</sup> For example, one evaluation of a storybook-based curriculum found that children were better able to identify certain vegetables and more likely to like cauliflower after completing the curriculum.<sup>8</sup>



© Doctor Yum Project

**Nutrition Storybooks.** The Childhood Nutrition Storybooks are included as part of the Doctor Yum Project curriculum and are intended to be used in the classroom and loaned to caregivers. They provide fun, colorful stories about types of healthy foods, how foods grow, and trying healthy foods. The storybooks also include tips for caregivers, such as how to navigate picky eaters.

### Strategy 3: Communicate with caregivers consistently and through multiple modes to increase caregiver awareness of classroom policies and ongoing activities.

#### Ys in Practice

Ys communicated with caregivers in the following ways:

- **Bulletin Boards.** Ys prepared bulletin boards in their lobbies to display nutrition lessons used in the classroom and take-home activities.
- **Apps.** Ys used childcare apps such as [HiMama](#), [Tadpoles](#), and [Brightwheel](#) to communicate directly with caregivers about classroom activities. Many Ys successfully engaged caregivers by sharing photos of their children engaging in nutrition activities through these apps.
- **Social Media.** Ys leveraged social media, such as Facebook groups, to provide updates about classroom activities and Y events. Ys also shared take-home activities on social media. Ys recommended sharing posts and resources across partner or other community pages when possible.
- **Newsletters.** Ys distributed newsletters regularly (e.g., quarterly) to keep caregivers updated about learnings in the classroom and opportunities to get involved.



Dear Early Childhood and PEL Families,  
The past few months have been so exciting in our nutrition world! Each month, our preschool classrooms are learning about different foods to help educate and excite them to try new foods. Here's what we've been up to:

- In October your children participated in an apple taste test which allowed them to explore 3 different types of apples.
- We hosted our first Cooking with Littles cooking classes, which brought together caregivers and their children to prepare a healthy pancake and smoothie recipe.
- In November, we experimented with sweet potatoes. Your children learned about the health benefits they give us and taste tested sweet potato fries.

Check out the tips below on how to introduce new foods to your child and how to involve them in the kitchen! Also sign up for an upcoming Cooking with Littles class to learn more!

Be Well,  
The Nutrition Team; Maggie and Karley



© MetroWest YMCA

**Nutrition News.** MetroWest YMCA distributed a quarterly newsletter to caregivers, which included updates about classroom activities, photos of children engaging in activities, tips for caregivers, and upcoming events.

## Y Lessons Learned

- Communicate with caregivers frequently and send multiple reminders, especially ahead of activities or events in which caregivers should be involved. In addition to the methods listed above, Ys successfully communicated with caregivers through emails and flyers.
- Use QR codes on materials (e.g., bulletin boards and newsletters) to link caregivers to additional information or activities. Assess caregiver engagement by using dynamic QR codes, which allow tracking of metrics such as number of scans and time or day scanned.
- Directly ask caregivers to support their child’s nutrition program, such as through donating or volunteering. Some caregivers want to engage with programming but may not ask to get involved independently. Use platforms like [VolunteerMatters](#) to organize volunteers, assign shifts, and track volunteer hours.
- Clearly communicate classroom policies around food, such as whether children are allowed to bring in outside food. Educate staff on language and communication techniques they can use with caregivers to encourage children to eat Y-prepared meals. For example, emphasize that Y-prepared meals save time for caregivers or return polite notes about classroom food policies in lunchboxes for caregivers.

## In the Research

**There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of specific communication channels, but some qualitative evidence indicates that childcare providers and caregivers perceived benefits from written and verbal communication methods about topics such as classroom food policies, children’s eating habits at school, and recipes and suggested foods.**<sup>11-13</sup>

- One study of 18 childcare providers found that providers emphasized the benefits of sharing written materials, such as caregiver handbooks, menus, and flyers, with caregivers to reinforce food conversations and classroom policies about food.<sup>12</sup> Providers also found it helpful to communicate regulations (e.g., Child and Adult Care Food Program requirements) to caregivers to explain classroom nutrition policies, such as requirements around bringing in food from home.
- One study of 31 preschool caregivers found that many caregivers want childcare centers to regularly share written information (e.g., handouts, tip cards, recipes and suggested foods) and information about what their children eat at school.<sup>11</sup>
- Another study of 39 childcare staff and 25 preschool caregivers suggested using a mix of written and face-to-face communication styles was effective in communicating with caregivers.<sup>13</sup> Some caregivers preferred written communications (e.g., daily reports of their child’s eating habits, parent handbooks of classroom policies, calendars of meals). In contrast, others

preferred verbal conversations (e.g., face-to-face or phone conversations with staff). Caregivers also appreciated receiving information about what and when their children ate at school (e.g., what they ate that day and what foods they liked) to help caregivers plan meals at home.

## Strategy 4: Provide safe spaces and opportunities for caregivers to ask questions, provide feedback, and engage with program staff to adapt nutrition activities.

### Ys in Practice

Ys implemented the following mechanisms to gather input from caregivers:

- **Caregiver Advisory Committees.** Ys implemented Caregiver Advisory Committees to allow caregivers opportunities to inform and influence nutrition programming, such as helping design meal menus. To establish Caregiver Advisory Committees, Ys recommended setting clear expectations of the group's role, selecting individuals with diverse experiences, and having patience and grace. Y Caregiver Advisory Committees met regularly (e.g., monthly).
- **Surveys.** Ys distributed online and paper surveys regularly to understand families' needs and preferences. Ys suggested using surveys to ask families about their current nutrition situation, what type of information they would like, and how and when they want information delivered. Ys disseminated surveys through classroom newsletters (e.g., QR codes and web links), social media, and on paper in person. Through surveys, the Detroit YMCA found that families wanted more culturally-relevant food. They worked with families to identify and offer appropriate foods in their programming.
- **Formal and Informal Conversations.** Ys initiated conversations with caregivers to provide additional information and gather feedback about nutrition programs. Conversations occurred in a variety of ways based on what was feasible for each Y, ranging from organized focus groups to informal conversations at pick-up. For example, some Ys implemented Caregiver Coffee Chats to share quick tips and resources with caregivers, provide touchpoints between caregivers and Y staff, and allow caregivers to mingle.

**Caregiver Advisory Committee Spotlight.** At the Monroe Family Y, one caregiver complained frequently about the meals that were served in the early childhood program. In an effort to turn criticism into a positive force, the Monroe Family Y invited that caregiver to contribute to planning the nutrition program. Over time, the Y and caregiver helped establish a formal Caregiver Advisory Committee, which has been successful in increasing caregiver engagement, providing valuable insight, and establishing stronger community connections.

## Y Lessons Learned

- Use incentives for caregivers to improve participation in feedback mechanisms, such as surveys.
- Track unspoken feedback, such as number and types of meals eaten or not eaten.
- Balance feasibility and acceptability of foods. Some Ys experienced challenges incorporating child and caregiver voice when their preferences were not within the program's budget (i.e., favorite meals were also the most expensive). However, investing in family preferences can improve engagement and avoid wasting resources (e.g., food waste).

## In the Research

**There is evidence that childhood nutrition and obesity-prevention programs gather caregiver feedback using mechanisms such as advisory groups, surveys, and focus groups. Some studies established feedback mechanisms using a Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach.<sup>14-19</sup> Existing evidence focuses on the processes and feasibility of gathering caregiver feedback, however, there is limited evidence linking feedback mechanisms with early childhood nutrition outcomes.**

- For example, one study established a Community Advisory Board (CAB) of parents and staff before starting a family-centered obesity prevention program.<sup>17</sup> The primary purpose of the CAB was to inform study materials and ensure the materials reflected participants' culture. Parents participating in the program were also given \$10 incentives to complete surveys about the program and outcomes.
- Another study recruited family members to a Citizen Action Group (CAG), which was responsible for gathering feedback from other community members and developing a childhood obesity prevention program for the community. At the end of the project, CAG members reported that they were highly satisfied with the CAG process, and most families (83%) were highly satisfied with the resulting childhood obesity prevention program.



Caregiver Coffee Chat with nutrition tips and resources at Y of Southwest Florida.

© Y of Southwest Florida

**Strategy 5:** Provide opportunities for caregivers to connect to strengthen peer networks, promote participation in nutrition programs, and encourage discussions outside of structured sessions.

### Ys in Practice

- Ys recommended providing opportunities to facilitate caregivers' conversations and relationships, such as coffee chats, holiday events, and play groups. Ys also suggested connecting caregivers who shared similarities, such as single caregivers or those with similarly-aged children.
- For example, the Caregiver Coffee Chats at the Y of Southwest Florida provided opportunities for caregivers to connect and led caregivers to organize a meeting group. Encouraged by nutrition conversations, caregivers met on a recurring basis at the Y to make nutritious baby food for their children.
- Some Ys noted that caregivers are increasingly interested in connecting with each other for support and socialization. Some nutrition programs are so popular that Ys had to implement waiting lists.

Y Lessons Learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Mix social activities into a regular schedule of caregiver engagement opportunities. For example, hold advisory committees and playgroups in alternating months.</li></ul>

### In the Research

**Some evidence suggests that opportunities for peer networking are of interest to caregivers and may increase social connectedness and information exchange among caregivers.<sup>11,20,21</sup> Existing evidence relates broadly to caregivers with young children; more research is needed to examine the relationship between parent socialization and early childhood nutrition.**

- A scoping review of loneliness of caregivers found that loneliness is associated with negative impacts on both caregiver and child mental health.<sup>22</sup> Some evidence suggests that certain groups of caregivers are at risk for increased loneliness, including caregivers with children with a chronic illness or disability, who are immigrants or from ethnic minority groups, and who are single. Facilitating opportunities to connect with other caregivers may alleviate feelings of loneliness among caregivers.
- One study of 31 preschool caregivers found that many caregivers are interested in opportunities to connect with other parents about nutrition, such as through family fun nights, healthy food support groups, and recipe exchanges.<sup>11</sup>

Caregivers suggested that childcare centers can help facilitate caregiver interactions by setting up communication channels (e.g., bulletin boards) and organizing activities.

- Another study of group-based caregiver training found that the intervention increased social connectedness between members who did not know each other prior to participating. The group intervention generally resulted in positive interactions between members and helped caregivers learn new parenting strategies.<sup>21</sup>

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