
THE IMPACTS OF FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION: MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

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As [National Farm to School Month](#) comes to a close, many of us celebrated with familiar foods and events, like picking out a pumpkin or crunching into an apple. However, we have to acknowledge that this was a National Farm to School Month like no other. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, early care and education (ECE) providers are navigating unprecedented financial hardship and often struggling to stay open. Sites that continue to serve families are navigating a new world of health and safety guidelines and uncertainty about how to give children the best possible care, support age-appropriate development, while protecting the health and safety of children, families, and staff. Additionally, the racial equity reckoning happening across the U.S. has forced everyone to consider how our practices can contribute to a more racially equitable future for our children.



Photo courtesy of [Little Ones Learning Center](#)

With many competing priorities, farm to ECE may not be at the top of everyone's mind. But farm to ECE initiatives can be a valuable approach to supporting ECE providers in providing high quality care in a safe environment, support and strengthen their local community food systems, and contribute to more equitable practices. Here are four reasons why farm to ECE is more important than ever.

1. **SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH** – The past eight months have been trying and traumatic for nearly everyone, including young children. Farm to ECE activities and approaches can help cultivate social-emotional health, build resiliency, and support development of skills to navigate change. Read more about how farm to ECE supports social-emotional health in this blog from Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems: [Cultivating Social-Emotional Health with Farm to Early Care and Education](#).
2. **EMBRACING THE OUTDOORS** – Outdoor activities, like gardening, offer engaging, age-appropriate experiential learning while maintaining appropriate physical distance and safety practices. Read more about safe gardening practices in this resource from Georgia Organics: [Hands-on Gardening Education During COVID-19](#).
3. **BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITH THE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM** – Increasing connections to the local food system through purchasing and serving local foods create opportunity for children to understand and appreciate where food comes from. Local producers may be able to offer consistent access to foods when other supply chains are disrupted. Importantly, purchasing local foods supports local food producers and keeps dollars in the local community. Read more about using local foods in NFSN's [Farm to ECE Local Purchasing Blog Series](#).

4. **CONTRIBUTING TO MORE EQUITABLE ECE AND FOOD SYSTEMS** – When approached with purpose and strategy, farm to ECE initiatives can increase equitable access to the benefits of farm to ECE and can be leveraged as one pathway to advance equity in ECE and food systems. Learn more in NFSN's [Vision and Key Strategies to Advance Farm to Early Care and Education](#).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FARM TO ECE AMIDST COVID-19

In addition to the resources listed above, many tools and supports are available to help technical assistance providers and ECE providers in practicing farm to ECE with safe and impactful approaches. Learn more about how farm to ECE can support and strengthen practices in ECE settings amidst COVID-19 in [The Significance of Farm to Early Care and Education in the Context of COVID-19](#) (for technical assistance providers and state agencies) and [Nurture Young Children's Health and Curiosity During COVID-19](#) (for ECE providers). You can find additional resources to support farm to ECE activities in National Farm to School Network's [COVID-19 Resource Hub](#) and [COVID-19 Farm to ECE Resource List](#).

Acknowledgement: Photo was the [NFSN's Farm to ECE Local Purchasing Blog Series](#)