

# CLASSROOM REQUIREMENTS

## Introduction

Strong Beginnings must comply with Public Act 116 of the Public Acts of 1973, as amended and the *Licensing Rules for Child Care Centers*. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) requires adherence to the *Strong Beginnings Pilot Implementation Manual* and to all standards in the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten* (ECSQ-PK) and the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Infants and Toddlers* (ECSQ-IT) as appropriate. MDE requires programs to address program quality in a systematic way utilizing both the applicable program evaluation tool and child outcome data.

Agencies which operate Strong Beginnings must comply with state licensing regulations governing child care. Strong Beginnings programs must receive a certificate of approval/license from the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA), Bureau of Community and Health Systems Child Care Licensing Division. All regular child use areas must be approved for use. Relocations must be completed with the knowledge of the Intermediate School District (ISD). The ISD and a CCRESA Strong Beginnings consultant must be notified within 24 hours of a special investigation being initiated, a change from a regular to a provisional license, or continued provisional status. For more information contact the Child Care Licensing Division at 866-685-0006.

This section provides detail and requirements for a high-quality, center-based preschool program that will enhance the development of young children.

When planning the program year, scheduled breaks, half-days, holidays, and possible inclement weather days should be taken into account and sufficient days and weeks scheduled to ensure that the minimum number of full program days and weeks is met. When excessive unexpected closures occur (e.g. inclement weather days) and reduce the number of days/weeks children will attend to less than the minimum required, make-up days must be planned. In the event that schools are closed due to COVID-19, no virtual instruction is expected but family partnership activities will continue. Program providers offering a part-year program beginning in January of 2021 must operate an in-classroom program for a minimum of 80 days spread over at least 20 weeks. In the 2021-2022 school year, all classrooms must have a minimum of 120 days of classroom instruction spread over at least 30 weeks. More sessions are strongly recommended to better support enrolled children to be prepared for a successful GSRP and kindergarten experience.

Any changes from the prescribed schedule and classroom practices for child and staff health and safety due to COVID-19 must be communicated to and approved by CCRESA. All Strong Beginnings programs must comply with COVID-19 related requirements from both Child Care Licensing and the MI Safe Schools Return to School Roadmap.

## **School-Day Strong Beginnings Programs**

School-Day Strong Beginnings programs must operate for at least the same length of day as the local school district's/public school academy (PSA)'s first grade program. A classroom that offers a School-Day program must enroll all children for the length of the school day to be considered a School-Day program. If the program operates five days per week, staff must have paid time for planning, professional development and parent involvement.

## **Part-Day Strong Beginnings Programs**

Part-Day Strong Beginnings programs must provide for a minimum of three hours of teacher/child contact time per day, for at least four days per week. If the program operates five days per week, staff must have paid time for planning, professional development and parent involvement.

## **Program Components**

### **Philosophy**

Administrative and program policies are undergirded with an underlying statement of beliefs about teaching and learning. A philosophy statement is a means of thinking deeply about preschool teaching and the beliefs upon which decisions are made. This is separate from a mission statement, which answers the question, "Why do we exist?" and articulates the preschool purpose both for those in the organization and for the public.

The written philosophy statement is developed and reviewed by administrators, staff, and Strong Beginnings advisory groups. It is included in the program's Parent Handbook. It establishes a framework for program decisions, goal-setting; and is aligned with the ECSQ-PK and program expectations. The philosophy statement also addresses local, social, economic, cultural, and family needs; and is promoted widely via websites, recruitment materials, classroom newsletters, parent-boards, etc.

Consider the following as the philosophy statement is crafted or reviewed:

- Why preschool is important: What is the purpose of preschool? What is the preschool's role?
- Those we serve: How do we support diversity among enrolled children? How do we define our community of learners? What is our relationship with the community, parents, teaching colleagues, and administration?
- Approach and content: What are our beliefs about how children learn? How do our beliefs affect our work?
- Program administration: Curriculum selection; instructional strategies AND teacher-child relationships; child assessment; program evaluation; and program improvement efforts for individuals, the classroom, and program.

## Comprehensive Programming

The ECSQ-PK and legislation require comprehensive programming. In partnership with parents, the Strong Beginnings provider supports:

- Children's health (mental, oral, and physical), nutrition, and development across domains in responsive environments that celebrate diversity;
- Professional development for staff to make referrals for needed services and to document all follow-up efforts; and
- A team approach toward child-specific plans for goals related to overall health and development.

## Parent Handbook

Parents are provided with policies and procedures that are easy to read, sensitively written, and brief. Refer to resources in the Reporting and Monitoring section for additional guidance on developing or reviewing parent handbooks. Features specific to Strong Beginnings must be included in handbooks: use of program name, logo and 'funded by' language. Strong Beginnings providers must have written policies and procedures that include the following:

- Program overview including a philosophy statement and curriculum, developmental screening, and ongoing child assessment information;
- Parent involvement information, including formal parent contacts, e.g. home visits and parent-teacher conferences;
- An emphasis on the importance of partnership between parents and teaching staff for child development (in school and at home); and
- Opportunities for decision-making activities within the local advisory structure;
- Child recruitment plan that includes procedures for selection and placement;
- An overview of the Family Partnership Process and expectations for Strong Beginnings families
- Referral policy to meet child and family needs, including follow-up procedures;
- Confidentiality policy;
- School calendar;
- Daily classroom routine for Strong Beginnings that includes what adults and children do during the day. (See resources for this section for sample daily classroom routines);
- Attendance policy;
- Exclusion policy must be written to describe short-term injury or contagious illness that endangers the health and/or safety of children, staff or others. Children must not be excluded or expelled from classroom programming or transportation services;
- Weather policy;
- Rest time policy (applies to Strong Beginnings School-Day programs);
- Medication policy;

- Health policies and practices, including those for Covid 19 prevention and on physical activity and nutrition for children;
- Accident and emergency policies, including how parents are notified of emergency events;
- Child discipline/conflict resolution policy, aligned with “Challenging Behavior,” below;
- Policy for reporting child abuse/neglect;
- Sliding fee scale of tuition;
- Grievance policy that clearly describes the steps to be taken when a parent has concerns or a grievance; and
- Passive consent notice of program evaluation. See the Program Evaluation section of this manual for sample language.

## **Class Size and Ratio**

A 1:7 adult/child ratio must be maintained at all times in Strong Beginnings classrooms. Each Strong Beginnings classroom must have at least two consistent adults present to allow staff to provide necessary assistance for diapering/toileting and other self-care and social needs. Class size must be capped at 14 children with two consistent adults in pilot Strong Beginnings classrooms.

Additional staff members must be available to allow all staff time for breaks. Staff assigned to teach double sessions must not be responsible for more than 28 three-year-old children. Staff assigned to teach double sessions are permitted to teach any combination of Strong Beginnings and GSRP classrooms.

## **Staffing**

The Strong Beginnings staff must have appropriate credentialing and sophisticated knowledge of early childhood education and practice a team approach. Staffing requirements include the necessity of the teaching team, which includes one lead teacher and an associate teacher remaining the same for the entire session, every day the class is scheduled. The classroom teaching team is supported with the active involvement of an ECS.

Refer to the *Early Childhood Specialist* section for specific credentials and responsibilities of this position. **One person may not be employed to fill both a lead teacher position and an Early Childhood Specialist position.**

## **Credentialing - Lead Teachers:**

Lead Teachers must meet the Strong Beginnings qualifications upon hire. A Lead Teacher will be considered credentialed for the position with minimally any of the following:

- A valid Michigan teaching certificate and an Early Childhood Education (ZA) or Early Childhood-General and Special Education (ZS) endorsement or
- A bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or child development with a specialization in preschool teaching. The transcript will document a major, rather than a minor, in child development or early childhood education.

When placing teachers in Strong Beginnings classrooms, consideration should be given as to whether their best fit is with three-year-old children. When possible, teachers assigned to Strong Beginnings classrooms should have prior experience working with three-year-old children as well as knowledge of and/or experience with toddlers. Teachers assigned to Strong Beginnings classrooms should also possess the patience and nurturing skills necessary to support young children who are often just beginning to master self-help and social skills.

It is not possible to hire a Lead Teacher who holds a valid Michigan teaching certificate along with a valid CDA. The ISD must ensure that written personnel position descriptions and hiring procedures are accurate. MDE will also honor a valid Michigan teaching certificate with PPI/Early Childhood Special Education Approval.

### **Credentialing - Associate Teachers:**

All Strong Beginnings classrooms, regardless of number of children enrolled, must have an associate teacher.

Any Strong Beginnings associate teacher must minimally have one of the following:

- An associate's degree (AA) in early childhood education or child development or the equivalent; or
- A valid Center-Based Preschool CDA credential.

The AA and the CDA are formal training options that uniformly and systematically prepare staff to be effective team teachers in preschool classrooms.

### **Other Classroom Staff:**

#### **Relief Staff:**

- Are appropriately oriented and trained in program procedures relevant to their roles (e.g., responsive adult-child interaction strategies, child development, special needs of enrolled children, family-style meals), and receive ongoing supervision.

#### **Substitute Staff:**

- A substitute teacher should have a minimum of a Center-Based Preschool CDA. Any long-term substitute (more than one month), must meet qualifications for the position being filled.

### **Staffing Noncompliance**

Gains in a young child's development are increased when the child has meaningful relationships with responsive adults who have a sophisticated understanding of early childhood education. For this reason, it is critical that Strong Beginnings programs hire qualified teachers. **Strong Beginnings programs may not employ staff who do not already possess the required credentials for their positions.**

## Team Teaching

The ISD and program administrators must ensure that staff implement a team teaching model. In team teaching, each staff person is fully engaged in planning curriculum, implementing curriculum both indoors and outdoors, child assessment, and supporting parent engagement through home visits, conferences, and parent meetings. The work is collaboratively shared, and a high-quality Strong Beginnings program dedicates time for staff to plan on a daily basis:

- All teaching staff participate equally in planning activities; ensuring associate teachers do not play minor non-teaching roles (e.g., wipe tables, prepare meals, etc.); and
- All teaching staff conduct and participate in children's activities.

The ISD and program administrators must ensure sufficient time for all staff to participate in planning, professional development, and parent involvement activities. Programs typically operate four days of classroom programming per week, with the fifth weekday set aside for above activities.

## Teaching Practices

Teaching practices encompass everything the teaching team does to facilitate children's development, including organization of the indoor and outdoor learning environments, the nature of adult-child interactions, and strategies for transitions and grouping. Refer to curriculum guidance, ECSQ-PK, ECSQ-IT and the program evaluation tool for further detail on high-quality indicators of teaching practices.

The curriculum promotes active, participatory learning through all portions of the daily routine. Strong Beginnings offers learning experiences personalized for the strengths, interests and needs of each child, in consideration of their family, community, and culture. The following are adhered to:

- Worksheets/workbooks/coloring sheets are prohibited for Strong Beginnings classroom or virtual use and may not be promoted for use at home.
- Whole-class activities such as 'calendar-time' do not permit children to initiate ideas/actions and are not part of a well-regarded preschool daily routine. However, a valid place for a real calendar is the house area, where children may use a calendar to jot play-themed appointments or in the variety of ways that families use real calendars. Teaching teams subsequently support children at their developmental level, partnering in their play to support emergent understandings in time-sense, literacy and mathematics, etc. For further information and suggestions for alternate practices see *Calendar Time for Young Children: Good Intentions Gone Awry*.
- A 'letter of the week' practice is not individually meaningful for children, has been shown to be an ineffective method to teach alphabet knowledge and is not acceptable within Strong Beginnings or GSRP classrooms. For research-based strategies to support early literacy see *Essential Instructional Practices for Early Literacy in Prekindergarten*.

- As with all classroom materials, technology is used with intentionality, which may thoughtfully include being used as a tool during play. Teaching staff consider the distinction between active and passive use, recognizing that within active use ‘the child’s mind is active and deeply engaged with the content’ (rather than the machinery). In other words, a child using a device in a physically engaging way does not necessarily reflect active learning. A child must intentionally learn from the experience for it to be active use. For more information, see the 2016 Early Learning and Educational Technology Policy Brief.

## **Class Structure**

Program providers that serve both three-and four-year old children should thoughtfully consider the optimal way of providing them with a two-year program sequence. Children and families benefit most when they have the opportunity to build strong, ongoing relationships with consistent teaching staff who understand and have learned to support their areas of strength and challenge. The following research-based approaches are encouraged sequences.

**Looping** is the practice of moving a group of children and their teaching staff together from Strong Beginnings to GSRP. When the children have completed GSRP, teaching staff return to Strong Beginnings and begin the two-year loop again with a new group of children. While new children may be added to the class to fill vacancies that occur, most children, families and staff remain together as a consistent cohort for two years. This approach works particularly well when staff turnover is minimal, and teachers are experienced with either Strong Beginnings or GSRP. Looping may be challenging for teachers who are new to a program and unfamiliar with supporting and engaging children at different developmental levels each year.

Program providers are also encouraged to consider the assignment of **primary caregivers** to each child. Relationships with children and families are strengthened when each member of the teaching staff has primary responsibility for half of the children enrolled in the classroom. As the child and primary teacher consistently connect, especially when assistance with self-care and emotional challenges are needed, their bonds deepen. Similarly, when parents routinely connect with or are contacted by one teacher, relationships with families are positively impacted. It may be used in traditional single aged classrooms as well as those utilizing looping.

## **Daily Routine**

Required parts of the Strong Beginnings classroom schedule are bolded below.

Refer to sample daily routines as resources to this section of the manual.

Classrooms may have alternate terms for parts of the routine, as long as names are used daily and are easily understood by children. A consistent daily routine must include appropriate amounts of time each day for children to:

- Participate in a three-part sequence of child planning, choice and child recall. In child planning, children indicate their choice time plans to adults, in a variety of ways, and in ways that are consistent with individual developmental levels. During 45 minutes of continuous, uninterrupted choice time in Strong Beginnings, children carry out their plans, making many choices about where and how to use materials (adults support children's efforts by listening, encouraging children's language, imitating children's ideas and words, and commenting on specific attributes of children's work). Children complete the sequence after clean-up time, by recalling and discussing their choice time activities in small groups;
- Engage in discrete small-group activities which may be adult-initiated, but not adult-dominated. School-Day and Part-Day Strong Beginnings program options offer small group activities every morning;
- Engage in large-group activities which may be adult-initiated, but not adult-dominated;
- Have snack- or meal-time(s) where staff and children eat together family style and share the same menu to the extent possible. (See Meals/Snacks in this section);
- Have transition times that actively engage them;
- Have outside-time where adults intentionally support and extend children's plans. Programs provide equipment and materials for active play. Children are minimally provided thirty minutes of physical activity per day, a combination of both teacher-led and free play, notwithstanding the time needed for adults to support children dressing themselves or transitioning to outdoors, unless prevented by inclement weather conditions such as heat, rain or wind-chill. School-Day and Part-Day Strong Beginnings program options offer outside, gross motor activities at least every morning;
- Have an opportunity for rest in a school-day program;
- Hear parts of the day regularly referred to by staff; and
- See a daily routine posted at child eye level, that is easily understandable and includes visuals for planning, choice, recall, small-group, large-group, snacks/meals, outside, and rest.

## **Additional Considerations for Children in Strong Beginnings**

Although both three-and four-year-old children are often considered preschoolers, there are typically consistent and significant developmental differences between these two age groups. This is not surprising as a child turning four has had 25% more time to grow and learn than one just turning three. The following should be considered implementing Strong Beginnings classrooms:

- In the fall of Strong Beginnings, some children may still be using diapers/pullups or in the beginning stages of learning to use the toilet. All Strong Beginnings classrooms **must** have a policy for working cooperatively with families on learning to use the toilet and have conveniently located

diaper/pullup changing facilities for use with children who need them. Diapers/pullups and wipes should be provided free of charge to Strong Beginnings families unless a child requires a particular type or brand other than the one provided by the program. All LARA Child Care Center Licensing Rules for diapering and toileting are to be followed. In addition, each Strong Beginnings classroom **must** contain a bathroom or have one immediately adjacent to its location.

- Three-year-old children have less developed language skills and smaller vocabularies than four-year-old children. Teachers need to spend more time modeling and expanding language with children as well communicating with parents who may not be receiving very much verbal information from their children.
- Strong Beginnings may be the child's first school experience for parents as well as children. Both may experience anxiety around the new situation and the separation issues that result. They will benefit from ongoing support and relationship building during the transition to school. The family advocate can assist with this process.
- Three-year-old children are just learning self-help skills required for independent functioning. They will often need more assistance and support with dressing, toileting, eating, clean-up and other such things than older children generally do.
- Younger children have less experience with peers and are likely to have difficulty playing, sharing and negotiating with them. They will need continuing modeling and guidance in conflict resolution as well as in identifying and coping with their own emotions.
- Since three-year-old children have less control over their body movements, they need more space to move, spread out and sprawl on the floor to prevent them from intruding on the space of others.
- Whole group times for children with shorter attention spans should include plenty of interactive opportunities that involve all of the children simultaneously. Music, movement and physical activity should be frequently included in activities and transitions to minimize wait time.
- In equipping a room for three-year-old children, consider purchasing multiples of the same items to prevent conflicts. Manipulatives and art materials should generally have fewer pieces which are each larger/chunkier. Materials such as books should be sturdier and classroom furnishings and playground equipment smaller than for older children.
- For additional suggestions, see [Guidelines for School Districts Operating Pre-K Programs for Three Year Olds](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/documents/GuidanceforSchoolDistrictsOperatingPre-KProgramsforThreeYearOlds.pdf) developed by the Office of Early Learning at the New York State Department of Education at ([www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/documents/GuidanceforSchoolDistrictsOperatingPre-KProgramsforThreeYearOlds.pdf](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/documents/GuidanceforSchoolDistrictsOperatingPre-KProgramsforThreeYearOlds.pdf)).

## Challenging Behavior

The structure of the physical environment, daily routine and activities presented, and the adult(s) approach all have a direct influence on child behavior. Research shows young children who struggle with behavioral and emotional problems have a fifty percent chance of continuing to struggle into adulthood.

Strong Beginnings providers must not deny enrollment or exclude a child from classroom programming or program provided transportation based on challenging behavior or any disability because of staff attitudes and/or apprehensions, unfamiliarity with the behaviors or disability, the need to access additional resources to serve a specific child or the need for individualized planning and intentional teaching.

There is evidence high-quality early childhood education minimizes challenging child behaviors when it focuses on child-initiated learning activities. In addition, positive behavior support is most effective when offered to children through a system based on positive relationships with children, families, and colleagues; creating supportive learning environments, intentional social-emotional teaching strategies, and mental health consultation involving intensive individualized interventions.

The effective early childhood mental health consultant has appropriate credentials and is familiar with program-centered consultation, where the goal is to build the capacity of staff, families, and program systems to prevent, identify, and reduce the impact of mental health problems in children and families. An ongoing relationship between a mental health professional and early childhood program staff, including the family advocate, ensures familiarity with the needs of children and teachers, timely consultation, and services.

The discipline or conflict resolution policy must address procedures for adults to support children as they solve problems with materials, do things for themselves, and assist them in resolving conflicts with peers. In the Strong Beginnings classroom, adults:

- Encourage children to do things for themselves throughout the day;
- Treat conflict situations with children matter-of-factly;
- Approach children calmly and stop any hurtful actions;
- Acknowledge children's feelings;
- Involve children in identifying the problem by gathering information from children and restating the problem;
- Ask children for solutions and encourage them to choose one together; and
- Give follow-up support when children act on their decisions.

In December 2016, the State of Michigan adopted new laws restricting the use of seclusion and restraint in schools. As required by the new laws, the Michigan State Board of Education (SBE) developed and adopted a state policy in March 2017 regarding the use of seclusion and restraint in the public schools. Not later than the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, local education agencies, including

intermediate school districts (ISD), must adopt and implement a local policy that is consistent with the state policy. Specific distinctions for preschool-age children should be included in the policy consistent with the SBE policy. As ISDs are the sole awardees of Strong Beginnings funding, the local policy adopted by the ISD must be applied to all Strong Beginnings classrooms regardless of the entity responsible for implementing the program: LEA/PSA, CBO (public or private), college/university. The ISD must monitor both ISD-run and program provider-run classrooms for adherence to the policy.

## **“Specials”**

Strong Beginnings and GSRP classrooms housed within an elementary school are sometimes offered additional programming referred to as “specials,” such as library, computers, physical education, music, and/or art classes. It is questionable whether a classroom in which the Strong Beginnings teacher is implementing a comprehensive program (as required) has need of additional programming. In addition, the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) requires all regular child use areas be licensed, and CCRESA requires Strong Beginnings to maintain staffing guidelines with staff who have significant credentialing in early childhood education. Children who are at risk of academic failure also benefit most from developing strong and positive relationships with regular classroom teachers and consistent classroom routines. **As a result “specials” are not allowed in Strong Beginnings pilot classrooms.**

## **Meals/Snacks**

Programs must adhere to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)/National School Nutrition Programs nutritional guidelines. In addition, all programs must follow guidelines of the LARA Child Care Licensing Division. Foods served should reflect the home and community cultures and be high in nutrients and low in saturated and trans-fat, added sugar, and salt. Strong Beginnings requires Part-Day programs to minimally provide a snack. School-Day programs operating less than seven hours per day must minimally provide one snack and lunch. All children should eat the same foods unless there is a documented allergy or special need for individualization. Depending on income level, parents may be required to pay tuition, but parents incur no cost for program elements such as any aspect of meal service, including sending in snacks or meals from home. The program incurs the cost for individualization at meals unless changes are part of a special education Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

School cafeterias are problematic areas for Strong Beginnings to utilize as snack/meal sites due to time for transitioning, size of tables/chairs/serving materials, auditory and visual over-stimulation, and the loss of quality time for adult-child interactions. All meals/snacks must occur in space approved for use by licensing, and must occur in the Strong Beginnings classroom unless there is documented approval from the ISD due to extenuating circumstances. Adults in the classroom sit at the table, eat the same foods children do, and participate in child-

initiated conversation. All Strong Beginnings meals/snacks must be delivered family-style, supporting children to do things for themselves.

Program providers are evaluated each year on family-style meal service with nutritious food. When the menu includes breakfast pizzas, corndogs, French-toast sticks, etc., and program providers question whether foods are creditable or nutritious, a formal request can be made to **not** receive specific items. Program providers participating in SNP can address concerns with the school district's local wellness committee or reference the local wellness policy that each district is required to implement. Program providers can work with school districts and school boards to ensure that the local nutrition plan is written with quality features, e.g., foods that are high in nutrients low in saturated and trans-fat, added sugar, and salt. The Great Start Collaborative School Readiness Advisory Committee may help program providers to advocate that local nutrition plans include quality menus that reflect the home and community cultures.

If food items from home are permitted for classroom celebrations, consider providing a 'nutritious food list' within the Strong Beginnings Parent Handbook. Include special notation on allergies, a companion list of foods with low nutritional value, potential choking hazards and a contact person for questions.

## **Family Style Meals**

Snacks and meals in Strong Beginnings are part of the curriculum. Decisions regarding meal service should not be made based on ease and efficiency for adults. Snack and mealtimes provide daily opportunities to demonstrate the program philosophy in a visible way through the practices of participatory learning and authentic conversations that build relationships between children and adults. Below are quality features of family style meals, where adults and children eat together in the classroom.

- Flexibility in Meal Service
- Multiple conversations with program staff and parents have made it clear that more and more families are adopting specialized diets or desire food that reflects the home and community cultures, is high in nutrients and low in saturated and trans-fat, added sugar, and salt. Some of these features are not easily met by programs.
- ISDs and local programs may adopt new meal service policies allowing families to provide meals and/or snacks for their children. There are several conditions that must be met.
- Families must not be expected or encouraged to provide food for their child or the program.
- Meal and snack service meeting Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)/National School Nutrition Program (NSNP) requirements must continue to be provided.
- All licensing requirements for food service must be met.

- Family style meal service must continue. Children of families who provide food intermingle with the rest of the class at snack/meals, sitting and eating with the rest of the class and participating in all other aspects of the family style meal.
- Meals and snacks provided by families must also meet CACFP/NSNP requirements except when documented food allergies or intolerance or family beliefs prohibit. If inappropriate foods are provided, teaching staff with the support of food service providers, program administrators, and ECS must work with families to meet the requirements or utilize the provided meals.
- Families providing their own meals and snacks must sign an agreement stating their intent and their understanding of the requirements. For a sample form, see resources of this section.

Programs will also want to consider several situations that may occur if flexibility is offered. These and more should be incorporated into program policies, staff training, and written guidance provided to families.

- Will refrigeration be provided for meals brought from home? Will families be limited to foods that do not require heating/warming?
- How will staff manage possible child reactions to their own or other's meals?
- If parents choosing this option do not send in food for their child, how will the program ensure there is sufficient food to provide meals and snacks for that child?
- If a child brings food that does not meet the requirements, will they be allowed to eat it, or will it be replaced? Who will communicate with and advise the family?
- This added flexibility for parents does not remove the requirement that parents must incur no cost for program elements, unless in this case only, they choose to supply their child's food. This guidance also does not remove the requirement to evaluate program providers each year on family-style meal service with nutritious food.

## **Planning for Meals**

- Plan enough time for meals and snacks. When children assist with set-up, passing and clean-up, expect meals to take 40 - 45 minutes. Snacks will take 15 – 20 minutes. Meals and snacks may take longer in Strong Beginnings classrooms where staff are assisting children in becoming independent.
- Center-based programs must follow guidelines of the LARA Child Care Licensing Division.
- Assure there is enough food for each meal and snack. See the CACFP meal pattern. A sufficient amount of food must be available to provide the full, minimum servings of each of the required food components for all children along with adult(s) eating family-style with the children. Note that while the CACFP/NSLP/SBP Preschool meal pattern charts list the minimum required serving sizes for reimbursable meals and snacks, best nutritional practice would be to plan for a bit more of vegetables, fruits and milk.

- Foods served should reflect the home and community cultures and be high in nutrients and low in saturated and trans-fat, added sugar, and salt.
- Children's eating behaviors, food preferences, and willingness to try new foods are influenced by the people around them. Up to 12 experiences can be necessary for a child to try and then accept a new food! Strong Beginnings teachers help by encouraging children to explore and taste new foods.
- Children may have never experienced a meal served family style. Preschoolers love to serve themselves and will easily succeed with some guidance and encouragement. Be prepared to offer intentional support at the start of each school year, with newly-enrolled children and after breaks from school, such as long weekends and holidays. Use real food service materials to set up "meal" provisions in the house area, water table and sand table so that children can practice.

## **The Meal Service Environment**

- Meals take place in the classroom, away from high traffic areas. Noises and distractions are minimized or eliminated.
- A non-carpeted surface provides for easier clean-up.
- Children have enough space at the table for serving, passing and eating comfortably.
- Serving utensils are child-size with comfortable handles. Small scoops, tongs, and spoons may work best. One-quarter and one-half cup measuring cups with handles can be ideal for supporting both fine motor and concept development. Use small pitchers with handles and pouring spouts for serving beverages. Bowls with wide lips are most easily handled by young children. Plastic serving bowls are light-weight and don't conduct heat.
- Plates, bowls, glasses, cups and eating utensils are child-sized. Consider using plates with limited patterns and designs so that the focus remains on the food. Consider using smaller lunch or salad plates because dinner plates can be difficult for children to handle.
- A gallon ice-cream container or sand-pail, along with cleaning cloths, make fine clean-up materials for child use.

## **Characteristics of Family Style Meals**

- Children assist to prepare for snack or mealtime by assisting with washing and setting tables.
- At the beginning of the meal, children bring food to the table in serving bowls, plates, or baskets that children can use comfortably. There are serving utensils for all food.
- Children choose where they will sit. At least one adult sits at each table where children eat and eats the same foods children do. Adults typically position themselves in a mid-position, to more easily provide support and have rich conversation with all children.
- Food is passed from one person to another.

- Typically, an adult begins passing each food item, modeling with action and words as they serve themselves. For example, “Today we have yellow string beans. I am taking one spoonful of beans and then I’ll pass them to my friend Tamilla. Tamilla, here you go! You might want one or two spoonfuls of beans.” Adults provide verbal description as they model how to pass bowls and show children how to use two hands while holding a bowl on the outside so that their fingers do not touch the food. Adults model how to pour and scoop using appropriate utensils. Adults model conventional table manners, such as waiting for turns, passing foods and saying “please” and “thank you”.
- Children are offered each meal component and make their own food choices based on individual appetites and preferences.
- Rather than acting as servers, adults sit at the tables with children throughout the snack or meal, unless more food is needed from larger or high-temperature containers.
- Everyone serves themselves. Children are encouraged to take a portion of each food component. Family style meal service affords some latitude in the size of initial servings because replenishment is immediately available.
- Adults offer minimal assistance as needed. In the rare instance where one child needs more help than others, the adult can encourage peer support, and/or the child can be encouraged to sit near an adult at the start of the meal.
- Children choose whether to eat, what to eat, and how much to eat. Have enough food available to meet meal pattern requirements and to allow for seconds.
- Some food will spill as children serve themselves. Be prepared for this with a nearby pail of soapy water and paper toweling. The adult remains seated as the child (and sometimes peers) is calmly supported to clean up spills, wash hands and return to the meal.
- Adults participate in child-initiated conversation.
- Children help clean-up by clearing their places at the table, disposing of their leftovers, washing the table, and pushing in their own chairs. Preparation suggestions include having a nearby pail of soapy water and small cloths. If a cleaning bucket is used, it is cleaned after each meal service and cloths are either disposable or laundered after each meal service. Adults do final cleaning/sanitizing after the meal has ended and children have left the table.
- Children in Strong Beginnings will usually need more support in participating in serving, eating and cleaning up family style meals, particularly at the beginning of the year. The goal of such support is always to move the children to greater independence.

## **Rest/Quiet Time**

Centers that operate five or more hours must have a written rest or quiet time policy. The policy must comply with rest requirements of the LARA, Child Care Licensing Division. The policy should include:

- A time period no longer than one hour and twenty minutes for Strong Beginnings, while accommodating for the individual needs of children.
- Provision of alternate activities for children who do not sleep.
- Provision for parents and staff to support the developmentally-appropriate rest/nap needs of each child.
- Details on transition into rest time [e.g., children assist with putting cots out, getting their own blanket(s) and transition item(s); and turning off lights and turning on soft music]. Adults can assist in transition by moving among children in an unhurried fashion, having quiet conversation and providing soothing touch such as backrubs.
- Details on transition out of rest time (e.g., staff turn on soft music, open blinds, turn on lights, and gently awaken children with a touch and conversation). Children can assist in transition by putting away cots, blankets and transition items as appropriate.

## Parent Involvement

Parent engagement is critical to positive child outcomes. Strong Beginnings provides a variety of opportunities for parents to become involved in the program and regularly seeks input from parents. Refer to the *Parent Involvement* section for more information. **Parents must not be required to volunteer in the classroom or participate in group meetings as a condition of enrollment.**

## Transportation

Providing child transportation to and from the center contributes significantly to family access to Strong Beginnings, but this service is not required. Where transportation is offered, parents must not be charged transportation fees. Strong Beginnings funds may be used to pay for transportation but must meet the guidelines set in the *Budget* section of this manual.

LARA Licensing Rules for Child Care Centers include requirements for the transportation of three- and four-year old preschoolers. Licensing rules assure the safety and welfare of children, that children are properly supervised while being transported, and are not confined in a vehicle for long periods of time. Licensing rules apply to both routine and field trip transportation. There are specific rules for center-owned vehicles, vehicles of staff or volunteers, or other private transportation and also specific guidelines for public school bus transportation of preschoolers. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recommends preschool-age children transported in school buses always be transported in properly secured child safety restraint systems. In addition, legal requirements for use of properly secured child restraint systems while transporting children who have not yet turned four years of age, whether they are enrolled in Strong Beginnings or GSRP, can differ from those for children who have reached their fourth birthday. It is the responsibility of the program to understand and implement all legal requirements regarding restraint systems. In addition, programs must also ensure:

- Parents give permission for their children to be transported;
- Children are escorted by adults to and from vehicles;
- Children are offered adult assistance when entering and exiting vehicles;
- There is one caregiver, in addition to the driver, when there are over 10 three-year-old children, or over 12 four-year-old children on the bus; and
- Children are not to be in a vehicle for more than one continuous hour.