



United States Department of Agriculture



# Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Electronic Media Use

in the Child and Adult Care  
Food Program



**RESEARCH REPORT ON  
PRACTICES, CHALLENGES,  
AND TECHNICAL  
ASSISTANCE NEEDS**





The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 required sweeping changes to the USDA child nutrition programs, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

# Background & Purpose

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) required sweeping changes to the USDA child nutrition programs, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The Act expanded the purpose of CACFP to promote health and wellness in child care settings and instructed the USDA to provide training and technical assistance to help child care centers and day care homes comply with current nutrition, physical activity, and electronic media use recommendations. Under the HHFKA, CACFP centers and homes are encouraged to follow the most recent *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* to serve healthful foods (like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and fat-free and low-fat milk products), reduce sedentary behaviors, and provide opportunities for regular physical activity.

In 2013, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) contracted with FCB Garfinkel, KRC Research, and Weber Shandwick to conduct research among CACFP audiences in the areas of nutrition, physical activity, and electronic media use. The purpose of the research was to determine: perceived challenges in implementing recommendations in the three areas, training and technical assistance needs, and preferred formats for training and resources.

## Method

The study was conducted by KRC Research in two phases during 2014. In Phase 1, KRC conducted a national survey, administered both online and by telephone, among the following CACFP audiences: providers (child care centers and family day care homes), sponsoring organizations, and State agencies. The study was conducted in both English and Spanish. The 25-minute survey asked detailed questions about nutrition, physical activity, and electronic media use—including awareness, knowledge, reported behaviors, challenges, needs, and preferred communications methods. The following are represented in the study:

- Full day child care to children ages 0 to 5;
- Varying provider education and income levels;
- Urban, suburban, and rural communities; and
- Both large and small organizations.

Phase 2 consisted of seven followup telephone focus groups, randomly recruited from the Phase 1 participants who volunteered to participate in further research (62percent of Phase 1 participants). Each of the CACFP audiences was represented in the focus groups, which elaborated on the findings of the Phase 1 survey and explored unanswered questions.

### By the numbers:

1,402

Total research participants representing,

48 States, the District of Columbia, and U.S. Territories across,

7 FNS Regions

## SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS



### Nutrition

#### All groups are at least somewhat familiar with the *2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs)*

- Interest in meeting the DGA recommendations is high!
- All audiences appreciate nutrition guidelines specific to age groups.

#### Many providers are serving healthful and nutritious food and beverages, including:

- Whole grains
- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Milk
- Water

#### Providers would like help with their biggest challenges:

- Meal planning
- Recipe ideas
- Managing food costs

#### Providers want to learn from peers about best practices in promoting healthy habits

- Not only among children,
- But also among the parents of children in their care.

**Providers are engaged – especially on the topic of nutrition.**



### Physical Activity

#### All groups recognize the value of age-specific physical activity guidelines

- Guidelines can help create structure.
- Some providers are less familiar with what children can do at different ages.

**Time for physical activity reported by providers is what they perceive to be best practices, but not always consistent with actual recommendations.**

#### Key factors providers consider when deciding on physical activity:

- Safety
- Caregiver-to-child ratio
- Children's clothing and footwear
- Space or equipment limitations

#### Key barriers to promoting physical activity:

- Weather
- Finding activities conducive to smaller, indoor spaces



## Electronic Media Use

**Audiences differ in perceived appropriateness of use in child care settings:**

- State agency staff are more likely to say young children should not be exposed to electronic media.
- Most providers and sponsoring organizations see electronic media as an asset if both limited and appropriately used.

**Use is associated with age**

- Younger children are allowed less screen time per day than older children.

**A top challenge to limiting use in child care settings:**

- Finding activities for mixed-age groups

**Providers discuss primarily using electronic media for educational purposes**

- Some report having well-defined strategies for limiting electronic media use.

**There is less interest in training on electronic media use than on nutrition and physical education.**



## Needs Assessment

**All audiences want information and training on a range of topics**

- The greatest number of topics concern nutrition.
- Technical assistance and training needs and interests are aligned most clearly around nutrition over physical activity and electronic media use.

**Preferences vary around the delivery of information and training**

- Interactive training methods and peer learning, when possible, are preferred.
- Videos, webinars, and in-person training are all considered useful.
- Print materials can be shared with parents and provide expert reference for decisions and behaviors.
- Social media can play a role in helping providers communicate to parents.

**Multiple formats for delivering the same content are needed—one size will not fit all!**

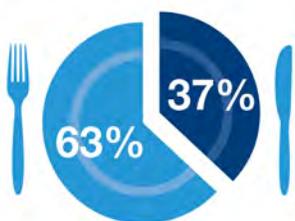
# Food Service

## Percent Saying Each Factor is “Very Important” in Deciding What Types of Food and Beverages are Served

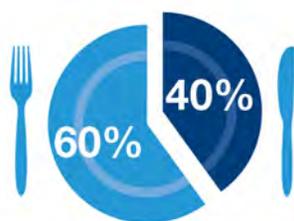
	State Agency Staff	Sponsoring Organizations	Child Care Centers	Family Day Care Homes
Nutritional/health value	69%	89%	95%	97%
Access to nutritious foods and beverages	65%	89%	91%	93%
Provider/staff knowledge about types of foods to prepare/serve	73%	78%	79%	89%
Cost	83%	73%	60%	66%
Child preferences	48%	42%	43%	53%
Parental preference	13%	28%	33%	47%

## Percent Reporting How Meals and Snacks are Served

Child Care Centers



Family Day Care Homes



Key: ● Family Style Meals  
● Preplated Meals

Providers who preplate meals express in focus groups that they want to know more about how to successfully implement family style service. Recommended training and tools include:

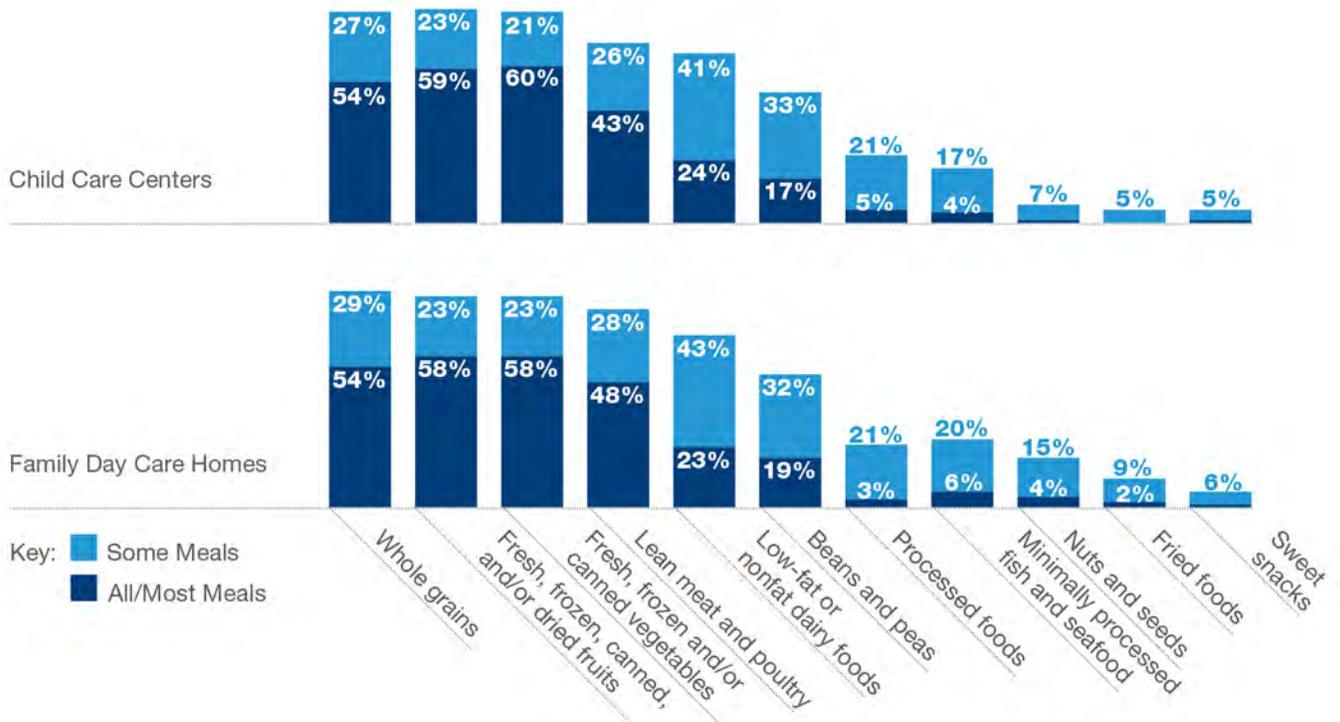
- Measuring tools that can be used for the first serving while allowing children to take the second on their own;
- Encouraging providers to model eating so that children try new foods; and
- Helping providers accept that messes may occur as children become familiar with serving themselves.



# A Closer Look at Key Findings



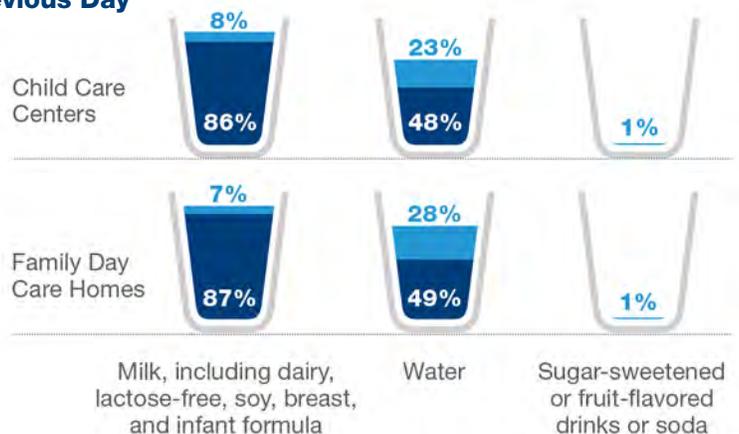
## Percent Reporting the Frequency of Food Groups Served to Children Ages 0 to 5 the Previous Day



## Percent Reporting the Frequency of Beverages Served to Children Ages 0 to 5 the Previous Day

Just under half specifically serve water all or most of the time, but focus group participants confirm that water is available throughout the day.

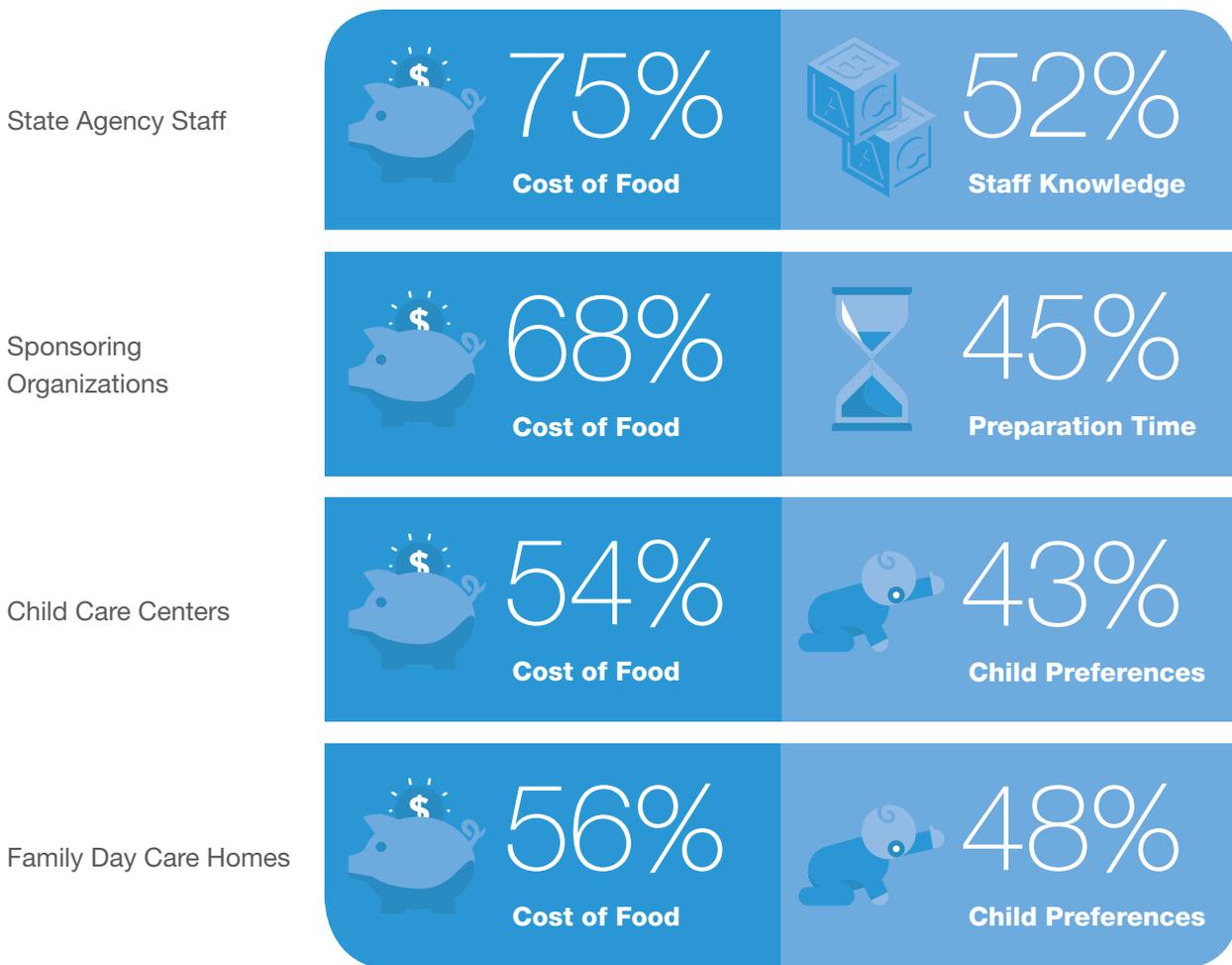
Key: 💧 Some Meals 💧 All/Most Meals



# Challenges to Meeting Guidelines

- Across audiences, cost is identified as a top challenge to meeting nutritional guidelines. In focus groups, however, cost is not raised until participants are prompted.
- Participants say that training on cost-effective recipes and food-buying strategies may help them overcome this challenge.

## Percent Reporting Top Challenges to Meeting Nutrition Guidelines





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### Other challenges discussed in focus groups include:

- The availability of fresh food;
- Gaining support from parents; and
- Managing food vendors.

“ I think different ideas for when we do cooking projects, quick and simple that would help educate the children as well, that would be great.”

**Child Care Center, mixed familiarity with Dietary Guidelines**

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### Suggestions to overcome nutrition challenges:

- Give providers the opportunity to share strategies among themselves that have been successful with picky eaters.
- Improve staff knowledge with increased and more targeted trainings.
- Provide cost-effective and seasonal produce options as well as resources and strategies for child care gardens.
- Make menu planning both easier and less time-consuming by:
  - Supplying new, easy recipes for meals and snacks with explanations of how ingredients meet CACFP requirements,
  - Developing a mobile- or tablet-based application that builds recipes based on available foods inputted by the provider, and
  - Providing recipes that reflect cultural influences.

“ You can feed almost a whole class with a bag of apples for \$3...a box of blueberries to introduce them to something new would be, like, \$3 or \$4, and you can only serve one or two kids with that box of blueberries.”

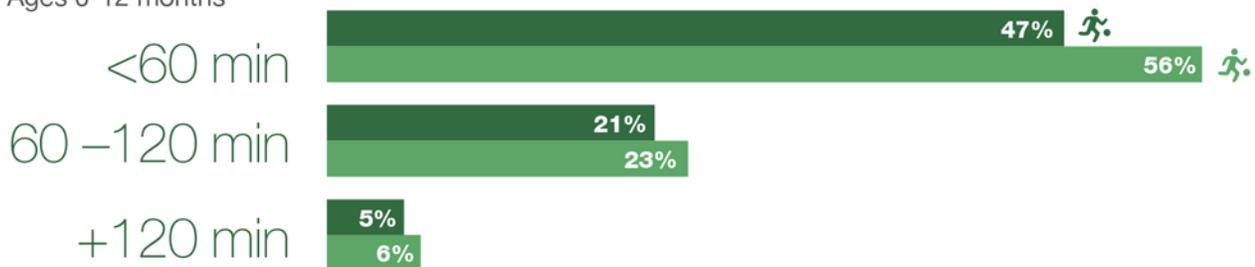
**Sponsoring Organization**

# Physical Activity

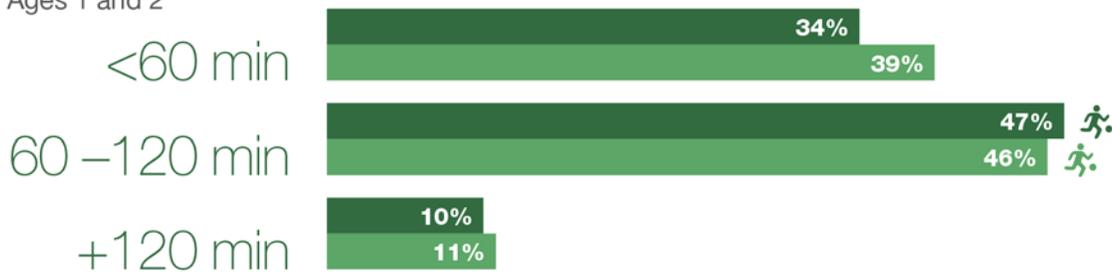
- Actual time spent on physical activity mirrors perceptions about what is recommended.
- However, there is a gap—these amounts tend not to match with existing physical activity recommendations.

## Percent Reporting Actual Active Time per Day by Age

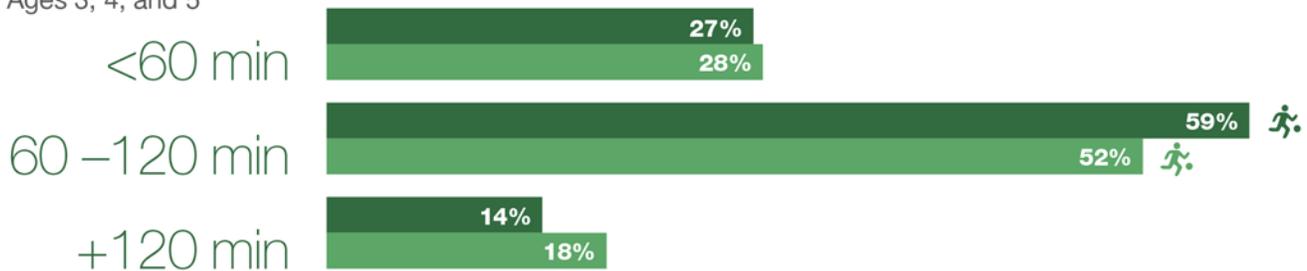
Ages 0-12 months



Ages 1 and 2



Ages 3, 4, and 5



Key:  Child Care Centers  Family Day Care Homes 🚶 Indicates the most frequently selected response by audience



## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

### Influences

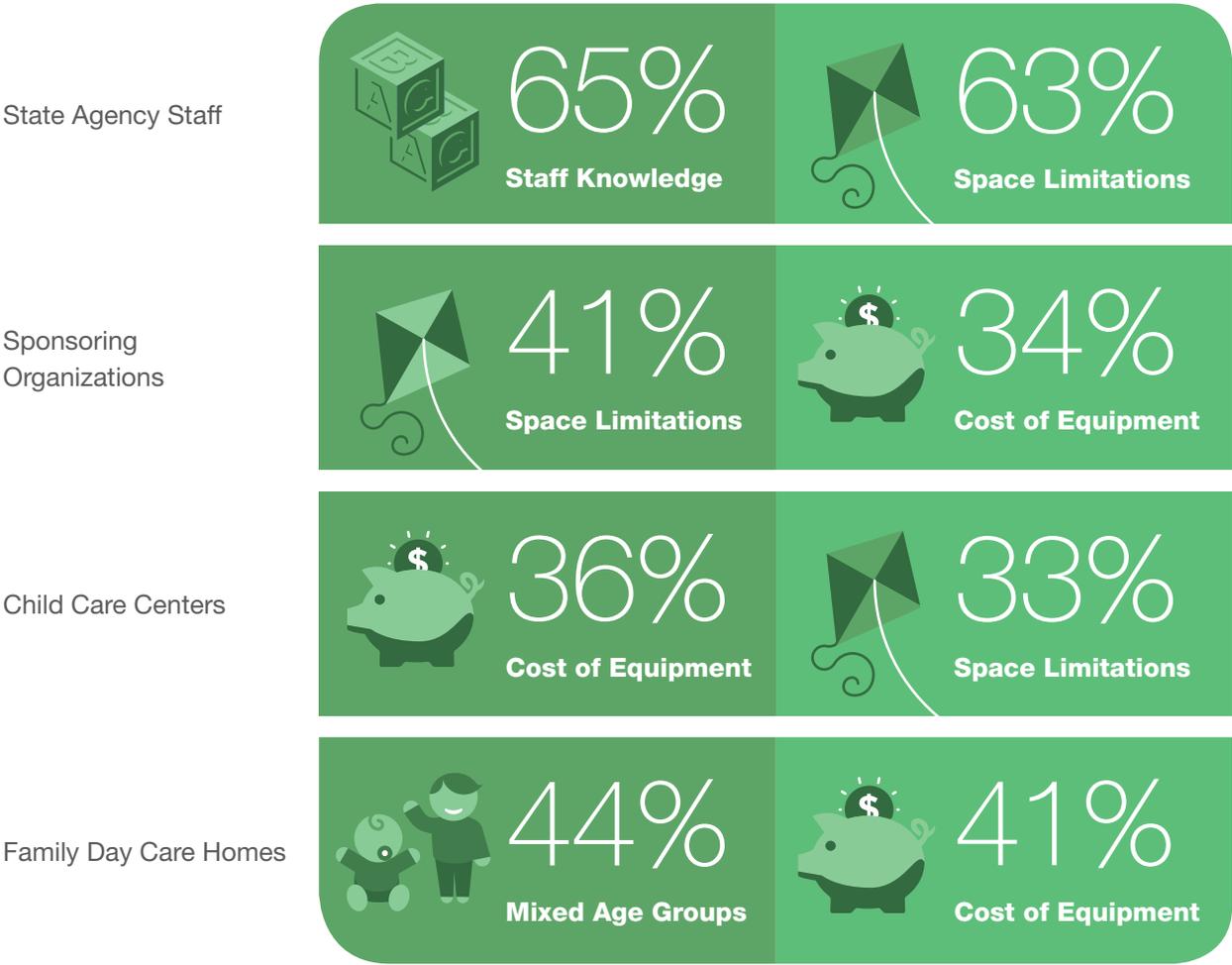
#### Percent Saying Each Factor is “Very Important” in Deciding the Amount of Time Children Have for Physical Activity in a Typical Day

	State Agency Staff	Sponsoring Organizations	Child Care Centers	Family Day Care Homes
Safety concerns	73%	75%	83%	89%
Caregiver to child ratio	58%	65%	74%	73%
Children wearing inappropriate clothing and/or footwear	56%	59%	66%	78%
Weather	46%	53%	66%	77%
Space or equipment limitations	56%	56%	56%	69%
Staff interest in physical activity	52%	57%	49%	58%
Child preferences	12%	39%	40%	52%
Parental preferences about children’s activities in child care	15%	30%	31%	48%
Electronic media use	27%	20%	12%	23%

# Challenges to Providing Opportunities for Physical Activity

Challenges to providing opportunities for physical activity vary by audience, although weather and space limitations are raised as key issues during focus groups.

## Percent Reporting Top Challenges to Ensuring There are Enough Opportunities for Physical Activity





## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- To overcome challenges of providing opportunity for physical activity in inclement weather and in small spaces:
  - Examples of how structured and unstructured play can be adapted to situations in which space or equipment is limited, and
  - Ideas for more indoor activities can be distributed.
  - Dancing was cited by providers as one popular indoor activity.
- Identifying activities that can occur without expensive equipment will help overcome the challenge of cost.
- Information about how to adapt common activities for different age groups will be particularly useful to family day care homes.
- During focus groups, providers also note that parental involvement in incorporating physical activity into children’s lifestyles can be a challenge.
  - Increasing communication with parents about physical activity practices at child care facilities,
  - Sharing health information with parents to generate awareness of the importance of physical activity, and
  - Sharing ideas about easy ways to incorporate more physical activity at home may help overcome this barrier.

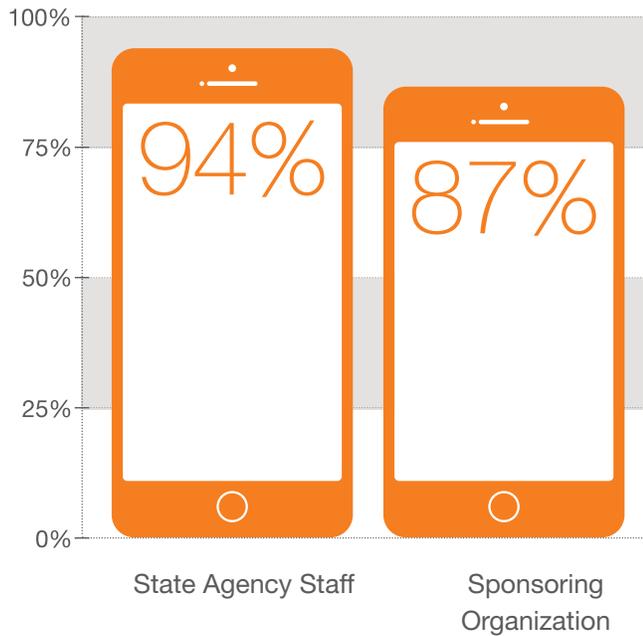
“ I think what would help more is giving actual examples of structured activity that the kids can do and of course...we don't want the kids to get hurt or they might be afraid to do it. But if it's something age appropriate to where we can find a way to get the kids all involved, then that way, we're incorporating the physical activity as part of their routine, as something that they just do normally.”

**Sponsoring Organization**

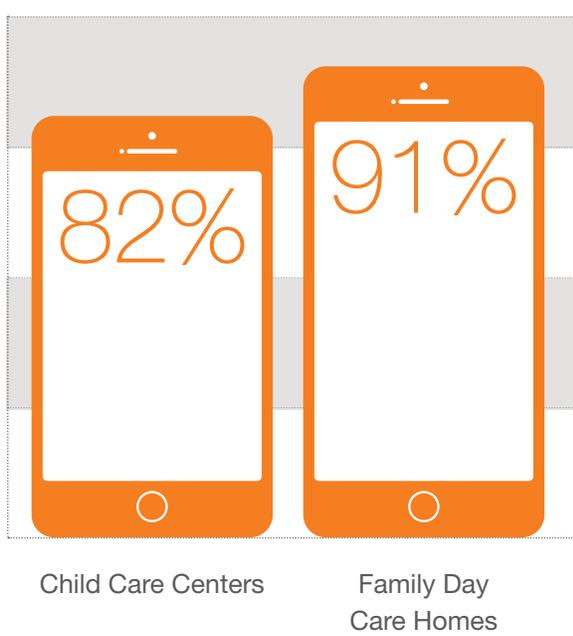
# Electronic Media

- Electronic media use is widespread in childcare settings.
- In focus groups, providers discuss primarily using electronic media for educational purposes and say that it is limited.
- Providers do, however, see a benefit to some screen time.

**Percent Perceived Prevalence of Electronic Media Use in Child Care Settings**



**Percent Reporting Electronic Media Use**



For the purposes of this research, “electronic media use” included any TV, video, and DVD watching, electronic games, computer use, and use of other electronic devices (like cell phones).



## Limited Use

### Percent Saying Each Factor is “Very Important” in Deciding the Amount of Time Children Spend Using Electronic Media in Child Care Settings

	State Agency Staff	Sponsoring Organizations	Child Care Centers	Family Day Care Homes
Caregiver to child ratio	31%	37%	40%	45%
Lack of staff knowledge about the need to limit electronic media use and/or more age appropriate activities	52%	47%	39%	39%
Weather	31%	31%	29%	46%
Staff breaks/need to leave child without supervision*	37%	37%	29%	39%
Parental preferences	17%	27%	29%	41%

*\*need for children to be self-occupied while staff attends to other tasks.*

“ Even though I think [electronic media is] wonderful and very useful, I don’t think they should be the emphasis of learning. I think that children still need those old-fashioned experiences of hands-on, to go out and get dirty and to touch things and to experience things.”

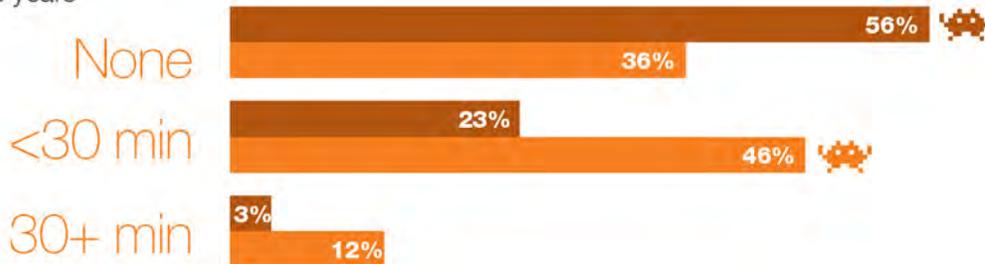
**Sponsoring Organization**

# Electronic Media

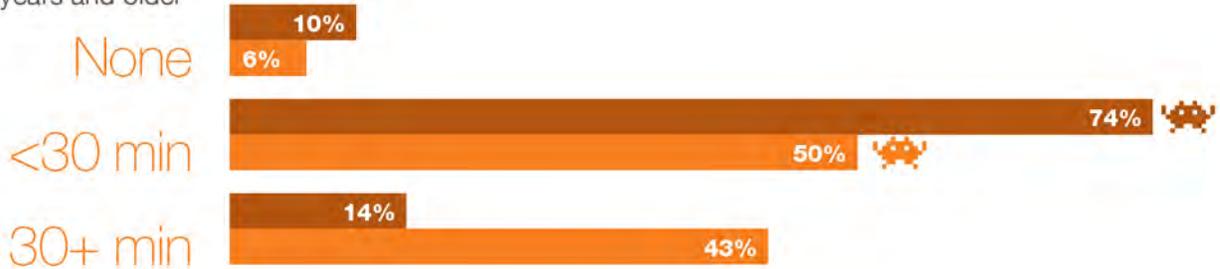
- The majority of State agency staff, sponsoring organizations, and child care centers say that children under 2 years of age should have no screen time each day.
- In focus groups, those representing State agencies insist that children age 5 and under should have no screen time, but in provider settings, the majority of children ages 2 and older are getting at least some screen time per day.

## Percent Reporting Actual Electronic Media Use per Day by Age

Under 2 years



Ages 2 years and older



Key: ■ Child Care Centers ■ Family Day Care Homes Indicates the most frequently selected response by audience

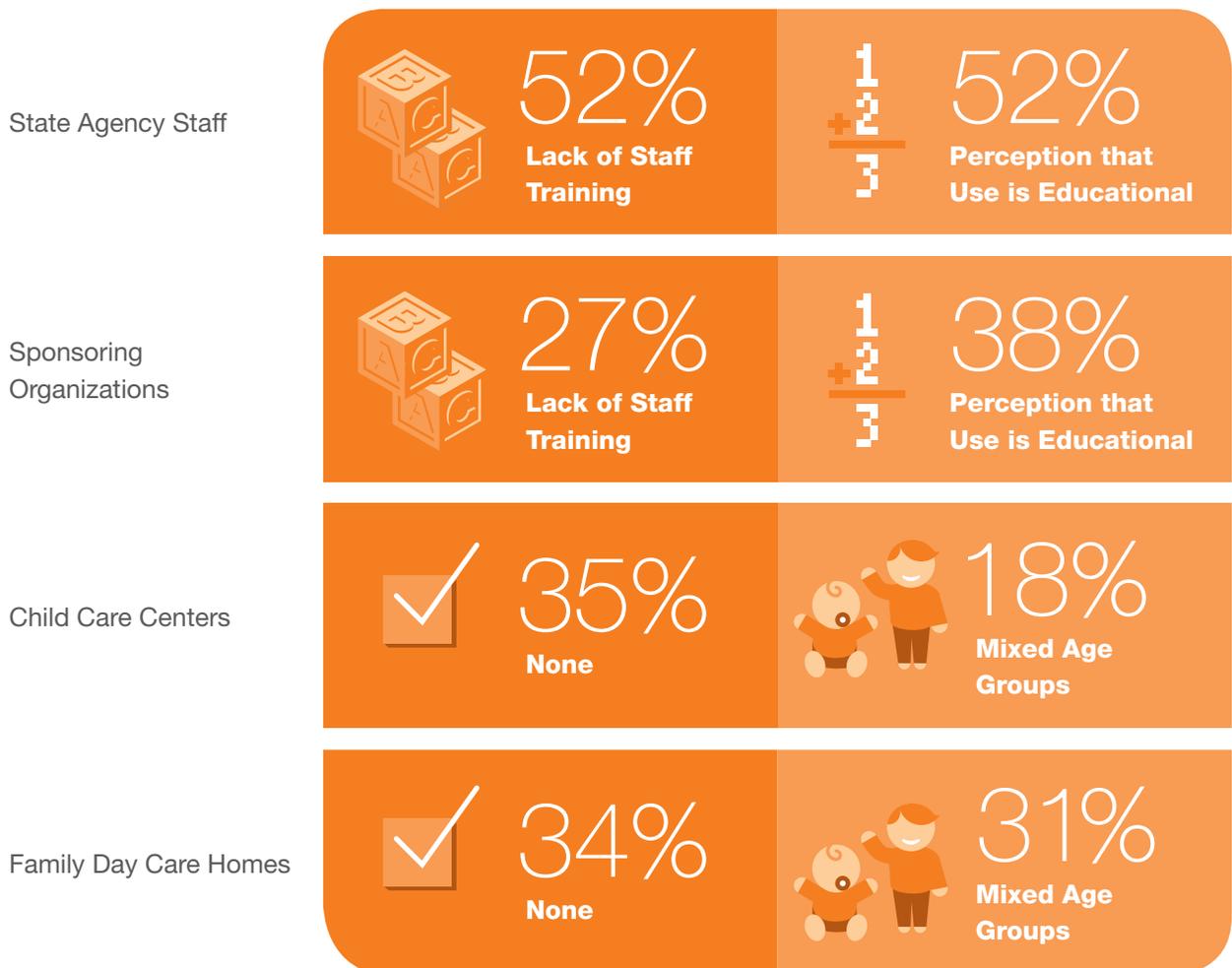


## ELECTRONIC MEDIA

### Challenges to Limiting Use

- Providers in the focus groups confirm that they do not face many obstacles to limiting screen time.
- State agency staff and sponsoring organizations see the perception that electronic media is educational as a barrier to limiting it. Suggestions to ease this barrier:
  - Sharing recommendations for screen time that take into account differing levels of access to electronic media outside the child care setting.
  - Providing examples of electronic media that are educational.
- Parental involvement is raised as a challenge during focus groups. Information and training to overcome this challenge may include:
  - Communicating with parents on the need to limit electronic media use with their children, and
  - Providing information and warnings about the risks associated with too much screen time.

#### Percent Reporting Top Challenges to Limiting Electronic Media Use





## NEEDS ASSESSMENT

# Technical Assistance and Training: Preferred Delivery Channels

**Providers prefer to receive training and information in different ways depending on the topic.**



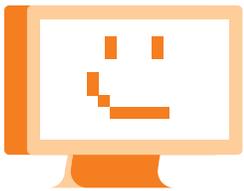
### **Nutrition**

Child care centers prefer social media, peer-to-peer interaction, video, and mobile/tablet apps for training and information about nutrition, while family day care homes prefer in-person training, video, and webinars.



### **Physical Activity**

For physical activity, child care centers identify video or in-person training as preferences while family day care homes identify peer-to-peer interaction, webinars, and printed posters. Child care centers also like print or email to communicate with parents.



### **Electronic Media Use**

Child care centers prefer information or training on electronic media use provided by video, while family day care homes prefer in-person training or a webinar. Child care centers would also like print or email materials to give to parents.



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For more information, contact  
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or go to **teamnutrition.usda.gov**

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