

Serving School Meals to Preschoolers

Preschool meals served through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program (NSLP and SBP) are designed to meet the nutritional needs of young children. Children receive meals that follow the preschool meal pattern if they are a student in the preschool age/grade group. There are two age groups under the preschool meal pattern: children 1 through 2 years old (1–2 years), and children 3 through 5 years old (3–5 years). Types of milk and minimum serving sizes for some meal components are different for the two age groups. By following the preschool meal pattern, your school can help young children eat the types and amounts of foods that best support their growth and development.

Preschool Meal Pattern

	Breakfast		Lunch	
	1–2 years	3–5 years	1–2 years	3–5 years
 Milk	½ cup (4 fl oz)	¾ cup (6 fl oz)	½ cup (4 fl oz)	¾ cup (6 fl oz)
 Fruits	¼ cup	½ cup	⅛ cup	¼ cup
 Vegetables			⅛ cup	¼ cup
 Grains	½ oz eq	½ oz eq	½ oz eq	½ oz eq
 Meats/Meat Alternates	Optional: Meats/meat alternates may be served in place of the entire grains component up to three times per week at breakfast. Minimum serving size for both age groups is ½ oz eq.		1 oz eq	1½ oz eq

Serving sizes are minimums.
Operators may offer larger portions.
fluid ounces = fl oz; oz = ounces; oz eq = ounce equivalents



Differences Between the Preschool and the Kindergarten Through 5th Grade (K–5) Meal Patterns at Breakfast

	Preschool	Grades K 5
 Milk	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 year olds: ½ cup (4 fl oz) required daily. ✓ For 3–5 year olds: ¾ cup (6 fl oz) required daily.</p> <p>Types: ✓ For 1 year olds: Unflavored whole milk only. ✓ For 2–5 year olds: Unflavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk only.*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not required to offer different options of fluid milk. 	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ 1 cup (8 fl oz) required daily (5 cups required weekly).</p> <p>Types: ✓ Unflavored or flavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must offer at least two different options of fluid milk (e.g., low-fat and fat-free milk). • If offering flavored milk, must also offer unflavored milk. • By July 1, 2025, flavored milk must contain no more than 10 grams of added sugars per 8 fluid ounces.
 Fruits	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 year olds: ¼ cup of fruits, vegetables, or a combination of both required daily. ✓ For 3–5 year olds: ½ cup of fruits, vegetables, or a combination of both required daily.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May serve fruits, vegetables, or combination of both to meet the combined vegetables/fruits component. • No vegetable subgroup requirements. • May serve 100% juice once per day. If juice is served at breakfast, it cannot be served at lunch. 	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ 1 cup of fruit required daily (5 cups required weekly).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only fruits are required at breakfast. • Vegetables may replace fruits (see “Vegetables” below). • 100% juice can be offered to meet up to half the amount of fruit or vegetable offerings in a week (no daily limit).
 Vegetables	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ Optional at breakfast.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vegetables may be offered in place of fruit. Schools must follow the following guidance when substituting vegetables for fruits. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ One day per week: schools may offer any vegetable. ➢ Two or more days per week: schools must offer at least 2 different vegetable subgroups Dark Green, Red/Orange, Beans, Peas, and Lentils, Starchy, and Other. • 100% juice can be offered to meet up to half the amount of fruit or vegetable offerings in a week (no daily limit). 	
 Grains	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 and 3–5 year olds: ½ oz eq required daily.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily: At least one of the grains offered per day must be whole grain-rich. • Enriched grains may be served at breakfast if whole grain-rich items are served at lunch. 	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ 1 oz eq required daily of either grains, meats/meat alternates, or a combination of both (7–10 oz eq required weekly).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly: Of the grains offered each week, at least 80% must be whole grain-rich.
 Meats/Meat Alternates	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ Optional at breakfast. ✓ For 1–2 and 3–5 year olds: Can serve ½ oz eq in place of grains up to three times per week.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When substituting the meat/meat alternate at breakfast, it must be substituted for the entire grains component. May not count a combination of grains and meats/meat alternates toward the grains component. 	
 Grain Based Desserts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not credit toward the grains component. • Sweet crackers (e.g., graham and animal crackers) are allowable and count toward the grains component. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can serve grain-based desserts denoted by superscript 4 or 5 in “Exhibit A: Grain Requirements for Child Nutrition Programs”** at breakfast for some or all days in a week. • Examples of allowable grain-based desserts at breakfast include sweet crackers, doughnuts, cereal bars, sweet rolls, and toaster pastries. • Items listed in Exhibit A with a superscript 3, such as cookies, cake, dessert pies, and cobbler, do not contribute toward grain requirements at breakfast. • Must meet the weekly dietary specifications for calories, saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars (by July 1, 2027).

* Unflavored whole milk and unflavored reduced-fat (2%) milk may be served to children between the ages of 24 and 25 months to help with the transition from whole milk to fat-free (skim) or low-fat (1%) milk.

** Available at: <https://foodbuyingguide.fns.usda.gov/Content/TablesFBG/ExhibitA.pdf>.

Differences Between Preschool and K–5 Meal Patterns at Lunch

	Preschool	Grades K 5
 Milk	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 year olds: ½ cup (4 fl oz) required daily. ✓ For 3–5 year olds: ¾ cup (6 fl oz) required daily.</p> <p>Types: ✓ For 1 year olds: Unflavored whole milk only. ✓ For 2–5 year olds: Unflavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk only.* • Not required to offer different options of fluid milk.</p>	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ 1 cup (8 fl oz) required daily (5 cups required weekly).</p> <p>Types: ✓ Unflavored or flavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk. • Must offer at least two different options of fluid milk (e.g., low-fat and fat-free milk). • If offering flavored milk, must also offer unflavored milk. • By July 1, 2025, flavored milk must contain no more than 10 grams of added sugars per 8 fluid ounces.</p>
 Fruits	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 year olds: ½ cup required daily. ✓ For 3–5 year olds: ¼ cup required daily. • A second, different vegetable may be served in place of fruit. • May serve 100% juice once per day. If juice is served at breakfast, it cannot be served at lunch.</p>	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ ½ cup required daily (2½ cups required weekly). • A second vegetable cannot be served in place of fruit. • 100% juice can be offered to meet up to half the amount of fruit or vegetable offerings in a week (no daily limit).</p>
 Vegetables	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 year olds: ⅙ cup required daily. ✓ For 3–5 year olds: ¼ cup required daily. • No vegetable subgroup requirements. • A second, different vegetable may be served in place of fruit. • May serve 100% juice once per day. If juice is served at breakfast, it cannot be served at lunch.</p>	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ ¾ cup required daily (3¾ cups required weekly). • Weekly vegetable subgroup requirements: • Dark Green: ½ cup • Red/Orange: ¾ cup • Beans, peas, and lentils: ½ cup • Starchy: ½ cup • Other: ½ cup • 100% juice can be offered to meet up to half the amount of fruit or vegetable offerings in a week (no daily limit).</p>
 Grains	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 and 3–5 year olds: ½ oz eq required daily. • Daily: At least one of the grains offered per day must be whole grain-rich. • Enriched grains may be served at breakfast if whole grain-rich items are served at lunch.</p>	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ 1 oz eq required daily (8–9 oz eq required weekly). • Weekly: At least 80% of the grains offered must be whole grain-rich.</p>
 Meats/Meat Alternates	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ For 1–2 year olds: 1 oz eq required daily. ✓ For 3–5 year olds: 1½ oz eq required daily.</p>	<p>Minimum Serving Size: ✓ 1 oz eq required daily (8–10 oz eq required weekly).</p>
 Grain Based Desserts	<p>• May not credit toward the grains component. • Sweet crackers (e.g., graham and animal crackers) are allowable and count toward the grains component (with no weekly limit).</p>	<p>• May credit up to 2 oz eq of grain-based desserts (denoted by superscript 3, 4 or 5 in “Exhibit A: Grain Requirements for Child Nutrition Programs”**) toward the grains component each week. • Sweet crackers count toward the weekly limit for crediting no more than 2 oz eq of grain-based desserts toward the grains component each week.</p>
Additional Considerations About the Preschool and K 5 Meal Patterns		
Sugar Limits	<p>Must follow the total sugars limits for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cereals: 6 grams (g) or less per dry oz. • Yogurt: 23 grams (g) or less per 6 oz. <p>By October 1, 2025, must follow the added sugars limits for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cereals: 6 grams (g) or less per dry oz. • Yogurt: 12 grams (g) or less per 6 oz. 	<p>By July 1, 2025, must follow the added sugars limits for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakfast Cereals: 6 grams (g) or less per dry oz. • Flavored Milk: 10 grams (g) or less per 8 fl oz. • Yogurt: 12 grams (g) or less per 6 oz. • By July 1, 2027, meet dietary specification to limit added sugars to less than 10% of calories per week.
Fat Limits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No deep-fat frying onsite (including at central kitchens). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep-fat frying onsite is allowed, but weekly average of calories from saturated fat must be <10% of total calories.
Sodium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No limit on sodium. 	<p>Must meet the sodium weekly limits for grades K–5:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By July 1, 2023: less than (≤) 1,110mg • By July 1, 2027: less than (≤) 935mg.
Offer Versus Serve (OVS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only allowed when preschool students are co-mingled with older children (see page 4 for more information on co-mingling). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed.
Family Style Meal Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students must select at least a ¼ cup of vegetables, fruit, or both if offered the preschool meal pattern. • If students are co-mingled and being offered the K–5 meal pattern, each student must select at least a ½ cup of vegetables, fruits, or both. • Minimum serving size of each item or component must be offered to each student over the course of the meal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students must select at least a ½ cup of vegetables, fruits, or both. • Minimum serving size of each item or items must be offered to each student over the course of the meal.

Meal Service When Preschoolers and Students in Older Grades Are Served Meals Together

Sometimes, schools must serve meals to a variety of age/grade groups at the same time. This is usually due to operational constraints, such as time and space. This practice is called “co mingling.”

Co-mingling occurs when:

- Preschool students and students from older grade groups (such as kindergarten through 5th grade, kindergarten through 8th grade, or kindergarten through 12th grade) are served meals in the same place at the same time;
- It’s hard to tell the preschool students from older students; and
- It would be operationally difficult to serve different foods or different amounts of foods during the combined meal service.

When the above conditions are met, schools may offer the meal pattern of the older grades, such as kindergarten through 5th grade (K–5) meal pattern, to preschool students.

Four Reasons To Avoid Co-Mingled Meal Service

1. Serving preschoolers separately from older students may allow for closer supervision of the younger children, thereby allowing staff to better assist students with food packaging and monitor mealtime behaviors that may increase the risk of choking.
2. A separate family style meal service allows preschool children to serve themselves, which can help children develop independence and build self-confidence.
3. Younger children may feel distracted or overwhelmed by older children, which may affect the amount that they eat within the provided mealtime.
4. The preschool meal pattern provides the amounts and types of foods at meals that most younger children need for healthy growth and development.



How Schools Can Avoid Co-Mingled Meal Service

Program operators are encouraged to find ways to serve age/grade-appropriate meals to preschoolers to best address their nutritional needs.

- Serve “Breakfast in the Classroom” or “Grab & Go Breakfast” (look for shelf-stable options and easy-to-prepare items, and use mobile service carts and/or thermal bags for easy transport).
- Stagger meal service times for both preschoolers and older students.
- Only offer food items that meet meal patterns for preschool and older students, such as unflavored milk, creditable grain items, cereals and yogurts that meet sugar limits, and a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Try It Out! Use the information in this worksheet to answer the questions below

- a. Tommy is a 4½ year old who attends kindergarten at your school. Should you offer Tommy the preschool meal pattern or the K–5 meal pattern?
- b. Amy is a preschooler who eats with kindergarten and first grade students at breakfast. At lunch, her preschool class eats in the cafeteria an hour before the older students.
 - 1) What meal pattern should you serve Amy at breakfast? 2) What meal pattern should you serve Amy at lunch?
- c. Mr. Smith’s 3-year-old preschool class eats lunch in his classroom every day. For lunch today, you want to serve fat-free chocolate milk, applesauce, roasted squash, and a turkey sandwich on whole grain-rich bread. Does this meal meet the preschool meal pattern? Why or why not?

Answer Key
a. You must offer Tommy the K–5 meal pattern. Meals are offered based on the grade level, not age, of the child.
b. 1) At breakfast, you may offer Amy the preschool or K–5 meal pattern. 2) At lunch, Amy must be offered the preschool meal pattern.
c. This lunch does not meet the preschool meal pattern. Flavored fat-free milk is only allowed for students in grades K–5, or for preschool students who are co-mingled with the older students and served the meal pattern for older students.