

**How Utah's Early Care and Education Sites Engage Caregivers in Agriculture-Related Activities**

Dr. Kelsey Hall  
Utah State University  
kelsey.hall@usu.edu

Cammy Patton  
Utah State University  
a00479184@usu.edu

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### Introduction

Farm to early care education (farm to ECE) educates children at early care and education sites about agricultural literacy, nutrition, community partnerships, gardening, and local foods through hands-on learning and other innovative activities (Community Groundworks, n.d.). Farm to ECE activities in agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) align with the American Association for Agricultural Education research values to nurture positive youth development through AFNR systems, foster healthy living, and advance public knowledge of AFNR systems (American Association for Agricultural Education, 2023). Limited research has examined caregiver engagement in farm to ECE activities; therefore, this research was part of a larger study that aimed to establish a baseline for farm to ECE programming in Utah by examining involvement. The objective was to describe caregiver participation in farm to ECE activities as reported by ECE providers. In this study, caregivers refer to parents, guardians, and other adults whose participation the providers reported. Caregivers are important stakeholders in farm to ECE because they extend learning beyond the classroom by influencing household food decisions and children's experiences with local foods and agriculture (National Farm to School Network, n.d.; Shedd et al., 2018). Findings may help ECE sites develop strategies to engage caregivers, strengthen agricultural literacy, and support local and regional food systems.

### Conceptual Framework

The Farm to School Network created the hybrid socio-ecological model (Joshi et al., 2014). The family level of the model provides the primary conceptual lens for examining caregiver engagement. Caregivers connect children's experiences at ECE sites with their experiences at home by participating in food, gardening, nutrition, and agriculture-related activities. The community level further reflects caregiver engagement in activities that connect with local food, nutrition, and agriculture organizations. The framework is used to interpret how farm to ECE activities extend children's learning beyond the ECE setting into their homes and communities.

### Methods

This descriptive, explanatory study used an online Qualtrics survey to examine how caregivers engage in farm to ECE activities. Nine items were adapted from prior research conducted in Wisconsin and the 2018 National Farm to ECE Survey (Rooted, 2021; Shedd et al., 2018). A panel of five experts established face and content validity. The State Board of Education's Community Programs Team distributed the survey to 143 Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Summer Food Service Program sponsors, reaching approximately 1,100 early care and education providers. After excluding incomplete responses, we retained 372 surveys for analysis, representing a 33.8% response rate. We analyzed the data using frequencies and percentages in IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.

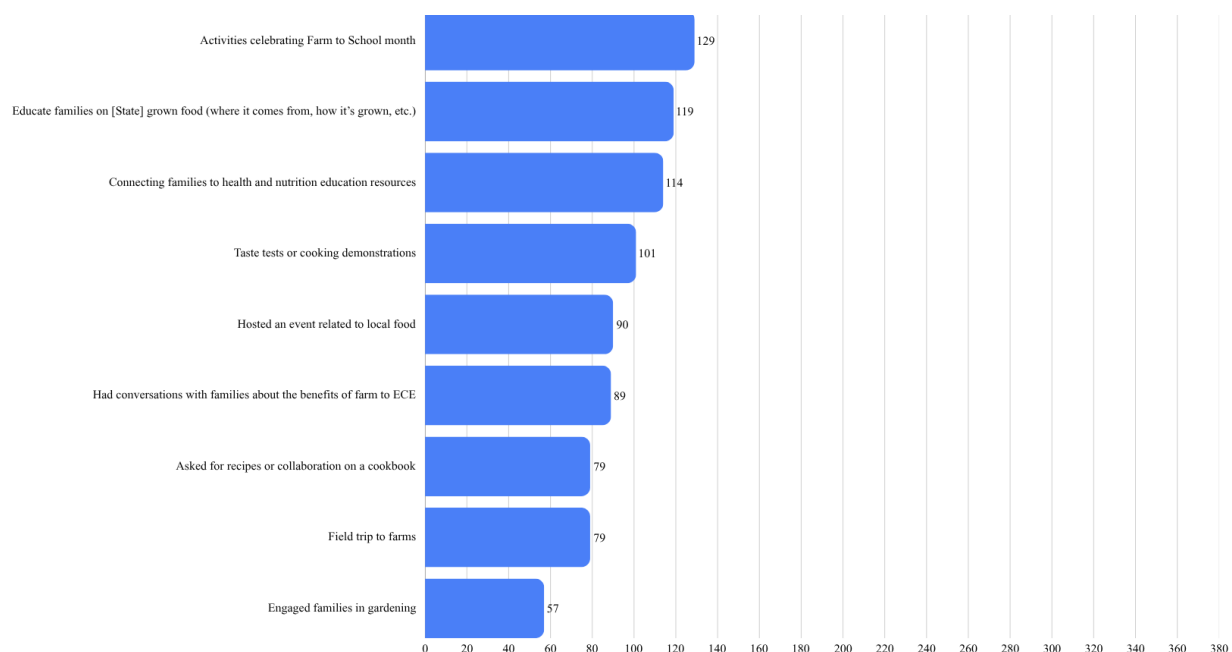
### Results

Respondents worked in diverse early care and education settings, including Head Start and Early Head Start centers ( $n = 83$ , 22.4%), child care centers ( $n = 82$ , 22.1%), family child care homes ( $n = 73$ , 19.7%), private preschools ( $n = 64$ , 17.3%), preschool through K–12 school districts ( $n = 38$ , 10.2%), state preschools ( $n = 29$ , 7.8%), and tribal child care programs ( $n = 2$ ,

0.5%). Programs served children from infancy through elementary school, with 48.9% serving toddlers ( $n = 182$ ) and 57.0% serving preschoolers ( $n = 212$ ). As shown in Figure 1, activities during Farm to School month had the highest percentage of caregiver engagement, at 35% ( $n = 129$ ). Respondents reported that educating families on state-grown food was the second highest at 32% ( $n = 119$ ).

**Figure 1**

*Caregiver Participation in Farm to ECE Activities*



### Conclusions/Implications

The findings may help ECE sites prioritize farm to ECE activities that caregivers are most likely to participate in. Celebration-based events, such as Farm to School month, where schools celebrate food education, locally grown food supplied in school lunches, and school gardens (National Farm to School Network, n.d.), had the greatest caregiver engagement and may serve as an effective entry point for involving families in agricultural literacy, nutrition education, and local food experiences. This finding doesn't extend to similar studies in Wisconsin and Washington, which report poor engagement in celebration-based activities. These states had the highest engagement when connecting families to local health and nutrition education resources (Rooted, 2021). Child care centers in Louisiana and Wisconsin also held taste tests or cooking demonstrations of locally grown food with children and family members (Rooted, 2021; Washington et al., 2024). The findings suggest opportunities for ECE sites to strengthen caregiver engagement through partnerships with Cooperative Extension. Cooperative Extension can support farm to ECE programming by providing research-based curricula and resources on local food, nutrition, and gardening; Master Gardener volunteers for gardening activities; nutrition education; family programming; and connections with local producers. Future research should investigate whether caregiver engagement contributes to changes in household food purchasing, local food consumption, and participation in community food and agriculture activities.

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