

Developing Healthy Mealtime Behaviors

When you think about the meals and snacks you serve to the children in your care, you most likely think about providing nourishing foods to help their bodies grow and develop physically. But, mealtime is about more than just providing nutritious food! Helping children to develop healthy mealtime behaviors can also help cultivate their social and emotional skills.

How can child care providers support the development of social/emotional skills during mealtime?

- 1) Set up regular mealtimes.
- 2) Serve meals in a pleasant social environment.
- 3) Be aware of children's developmental stages and common mealtime behaviors.
- 4) Permit the child to decide whether, and how much, to eat.
- 5) Offer a wide variety of foods.
- 6) Expect to offer new foods many times.
- 7) Serve meals using family-style meal service.

1) Set Up Regular Mealtimes

Establishing regular routines in your child care home can help children feel more secure since they have an idea about how their day will progress. Consistent routines provide comfort and a sense of safety to young children.

Help the children transition from the activity that they are doing to mealtime by giving them plenty of warning, and providing them enough time to make the adjustment. If they know that every day they will have playtime, then wash their hands, and then eat, it will make the routine easier for them. Having the children help to set the table, or put the food on the table, is also a great way for them to feel part of the meal. Doing so also gives them more opportunities to learn and to develop their physical skills!

2) Serve Meals in a Pleasant Social Environment

It is best if meals and snacks can be served in an environment that allows children to focus on the meal. Make sure that distractions are minimized as much as possible (put away the toys, turn off the television). Make the meal enjoyable by sitting with the children and engaging them in conversation. Adults can also model appropriate mealtime behavior by sitting with the children and eating with them. Talk to the children about the food they are eating, where the food comes from, what color it is, etc.

3) Be Aware of Children's Developmental Stages and Common Mealtime Behaviors

Sometimes it may seem that a child is misbehaving during mealtime when what they are actually doing is developmentally appropriate. By becoming familiar with children's typical developmental stages, a provider can use appropriate strategies to help children develop healthy eating habits.

Infants (birth to 12 months):

Typical behaviors:

- ❖ Infants will let you know when they are hungry by crying, or let you know when they have had enough by turning away from the bottle or spitting out the nipple.
- ❖ Because the infant's stomach is small and still developing, hunger will be frequent.

What the provider can do:

- Hold the infant during feedings and make eye contact to encourage feelings of security and trust.
- When the baby is old enough to sit up and start learning to eat with his fingers, provide finger foods so that he can practice feeding himself.

One Year Olds (12-24 months):

Typical behaviors:

- ❖ Children in this developmental stage are very curious and may dump or throw their food to see what happens.
- ❖ Eating often slows down since they don't need as much food as they did when they were a rapidly growing infant.
- ❖ Children may eat finger foods and begin learn to use utensils.

What the provider can do:

- Expect messy mealtimes!
- Allow the child to decide if, and how much of each food, she would like to eat. Do not allow children to take food from the table to eat elsewhere.
- Provide safe, child-size utensils and finger foods and allow the child to feed himself.

Two Year Olds (24-36 months)

Typical behaviors:

- ❖ Children this age may be easily distracted or be too "busy", and not want to stay at the table for a very long time.
- ❖ Becoming more independent, may refuse food.
- ❖ Food jags (where the child only wants to one type of food such as bread or cheese) are common. Children this age are learning independence and this is often reflected in eating preferences.

What the provider can do:

- Turn off the television during meals.
- Do not allow the child to remove food from the table to walk around and eat.
- Allow the child to decide if or how much to eat.
- Don't worry about food jags if the child is growing normally.
- Do not fix special food for the child, allow her to pick from the variety of nutritious foods you are serving.

4) Permit the Child to Decide Whether, And How Much, To Eat

Young children are very good at self-regulation, but that skill often disappears as they get older due to outside influences. Self-regulation (or the ability to eat when hungry and stop when full) is an important part of social/emotional development, so it is wise to do what you can to help children keep this ability. Practicing the “division of responsibility” during mealtimes is a great way for providers to support these skills! It also prevents the power struggle that can happen during mealtimes that prohibits children from developing healthy eating skills.

The division of responsibility is:

The ADULT is responsible for deciding the menu, preparing a healthy variety of food, and for serving meals and snacks at regular intervals. In other words, adults are responsible for the **what, when, and where** of feeding.

The CHILD is responsible for deciding how much to eat of the food served, or even if they want to eat at all at that time. In other words, children are responsible for the **how much** and **whether** of eating. (From: *How to Get Your Kid to Eat....But Not Too Much* by Ellyn Satter)

How does this look at meal or snack time?

For example: at breakfast you prepare and serve scrambled eggs, whole wheat toast, fresh orange slices and milk. You serve breakfast at the same time every day and provide the proper utensils so that the child can eat. **You have met your responsibilities!**

The child eats all of the eggs, drinks the milk, takes one bite of toast and eats one orange slice. **The child has met all of their responsibilities!**

5) Offer a Wide Variety Of Foods

You may be familiar with the different food groups as depicted by MyPlate. Foods are placed together in each group because they contain similar nutrients. Foods in each group contain just a part of all of the nutrients that children need for good health, so you need to serve foods from each group to provide all of the needed nutrients. By offering a variety of foods from different foods groups you can help to ensure that children are getting the nutrients that they need. Serving a wide variety of foods can also help children discover some foods that they have never tried, but may become their new favorite foods!

6) Expect To Offer New Foods Many Times

It often takes children a long time to accept new foods! It may take a child 10-12 times of seeing a new food before they are even willing to put it in their mouth. This is normal and is to be expected. Try offering the new food along with other foods that the child already likes. Offer new foods one at a time so that children are not overwhelmed. Adults often give up too soon if a child doesn't seem to like a new food. Don't let the child's rejection of the new food stop you from offering that new food again!

7) Serve Meals Using Family-Style Meal Service

Family-style (also known as community-style) meal service occurs when the child care dining table is set with individual plates and flatware. Food is placed in small bowls which children pass around and serve themselves from.

Family-style meal service is a great way for children to learn the important social/emotional developmental skill of self-regulation! Children learn social skills such as passing and requesting food. Emotional skills such as trusting others and making choices are also developed. You can help children with their social/emotional development by teaching them how to serve themselves, wait their turn, and clean up spills.

More benefits of family-style meal service:

Children learn:

- * How much food to take depending on how hungry they are (how to read their hunger cues)
- * How to pass bowls to another person.
- * How to use serving utensils.
- * How to ask someone to pass food to them.
- * How to wait their turn to serve themselves.
- * How to share (leave some food for others at the table).
- * The difference between serving utensils (shared by everyone, don't put in your mouth) and their personal utensils.

Some tips for successful family-style meal service:

- 10 Provide a pleasant environment for the children. Ensure that each child can reach the table and that there is enough table space for serving bowls, plates, silverware and milk glasses.
- 10 Provide child-sized utensils, bowls and pitchers. This makes it easier for children to pass bowls to each other and to serve themselves.
- 10 Talk to the children about hunger and fullness so that they can think about how hungry they are before serving themselves. Reminding them that they can always have seconds if they are still hungry can prevent them from overserving themselves.

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Phrases that *HELP* and *HINDER*



As the caregiver, you play the biggest role in your child's eating behavior. What you say has an impact on developing healthy eating habits. Negative phrases can easily be changed into positive, helpful ones!

Phrases that *HINDER*

INSTEAD OF ...

Eat that for me.

If you do not eat one more bite, I will be mad.

Phrases like these teach your child to eat for your approval and love. This can lead your child to have unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs about food and about themselves.

INSTEAD OF ...

You're such a big girl; you finished all your peas.

Jenny, look at your sister. She ate all of her bananas.

You have to take one more bite before you leave the table.

Phrases like these teach your child to ignore fullness. It is better for kids to stop eating when full or satisfied than when all of the food has been eaten.

INSTEAD OF ...

See, that didn't taste so bad, did it?

This implies to your child that he or she was wrong to refuse the food. This can lead to unhealthy attitudes about food or self.

INSTEAD OF ...

No dessert until you eat your vegetables.

Stop crying and I will give you a cookie.

Offering some foods, like dessert, in reward for finishing others, like vegetables, makes some foods seem better than others. Getting a food treat when upset teaches your child to eat to feel better. This can lead to overeating.

Phrases that *HELP*

TRY ...

This is kiwi fruit; it's sweet like a strawberry.

These radishes are very crunchy!

Phrases like these help to point out the sensory qualities of food. They encourage your child to try new foods.

TRY ...

Is your stomach telling you that you're full?

Is your stomach still making its hungry growling noise?

Has your tummy had enough?

Phrases like these help your child to recognize when he or she is full. This can prevent overeating.

TRY ...

Do you like that?

Which one is your favorite?

Everybody likes different foods, don't they?

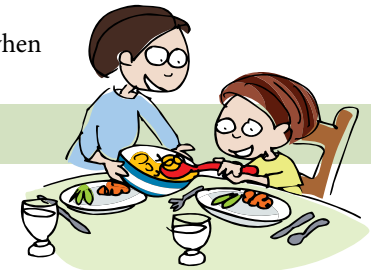
Phrases like these make your child feel like he or she is making the choices. It also shifts the focus toward the taste of food rather than who was right.

TRY ...

We can try these vegetables again another time. Next time would you like to try them raw instead of cooked?

I am sorry you are sad. Come here and let me give you a big hug.

Reward your child with attention and kind words. Comfort him or her with hugs and talks. Show love by spending time and having fun together.



Behavioral Milestones

The preschool years are an important time for developing healthy habits for life. From the ages of 2 to 5, children grow and develop in ways that affect behavior in all areas, including eating. The timing of these milestones may vary with each child.



2 Years

- Can use a spoon and drink from a cup
- Can be easily distracted
- Growth slows and appetite drops
- Develops likes and dislikes
- Can be very messy
- May suddenly refuse certain foods

3 Years

- Makes simple either/or food choices, such as a choice of apple or orange slices
- Pours liquid with some spills
- Comfortable using fork and spoon
- Can follow simple requests such as "Please use your napkin."
- Starts to request favorite foods
- Likes to imitate cooking
- May suddenly refuse certain foods

4 Years

- Influenced by TV, media, and peers
- May dislike many mixed dishes
- Rarely spills with spoon or cup
- Knows what table manners are expected
- Can be easily sidetracked
- May suddenly refuse certain foods

5 Years

- Has fewer demands
- Will usually accept the food that's available
- Dresses and eats with minor supervision





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