

Make Mealtimes in Child Care Pleasant, Easy and Appealing

Last Updated: February 08, 2010

Creating enjoyable mealtimes and snacks in a child care program will help young children learn health eating habits and develop positive attitudes toward food. Consider the following tips to make the meal experience positive for children in your child care program.

- **Make mealtimes pleasant.** Show your enthusiasm for healthy foods. Children will feel more comfortable if you sit with them and share the same meal. Spend time in positive conversation, and make mealtimes relaxed.
- **Help children learn self-help skills.** Starting in the toddler years, children can help set the table, serve themselves, spread jam or butter on bread, stir batter, or even pour milk or water from a small pitcher.



- **Remember that eating is a social time.** Children should be seated around a table so they can talk with and observe one another. Important social learning happens during mealtime as children learn new vocabulary and practice skills such as taking turns and sharing. Child care providers should sit with children during meals and encourage conversation.

- **Plan fun food activities to encourage children to try new foods.** Read a book about a new food, and then serve the new food as a snack when children are hungry. Let children help prepare foods. Getting children involved in food preparation will boost self-confidence, and may encourage them to try the food they helped create.

Tips to Make Mealtimes Easier

Serving meals to a group of children can be challenging, and encouraging them to take an active role in serving themselves requires good planning. Here are some tips that may make mealtimes in child care simpler.

- **Provide child-sized furniture.** Most child care centers use a child-sized table and chairs for meals. Family child care

providers may use child-sized furniture or arrange chairs, high chairs, and booster seats around the family table.

- **Use serving utensils that make it easier to serve the right size portions of food.** Utensils should be easy to handle. Tongs, smaller serving spoons and scoops work well.
- **Use plastic squeeze bottles.** Children can squeeze jellies, peanut butter, mustard, mayonnaise, ketchup, and other spreadable ingredients onto their foods.

Try using serving utensils of a different color. Having all serving utensils the same color, and a different color from eating utensils, will help children distinguish cooking and serving utensils from eating utensils. It's easier for children to remember not to lick the red spoon. If you can't find colored plastic utensils, mark serving utensil handles with vinyl tape. This tape lasts a long time and stays on well in the dishwasher.

- **Provide child-sized utensils for eating.** Small spoons are essential. A plate with edges or a small, shallow bowl helps young children to scoop up their food more easily.
- **Serve finger foods frequently.** Foods such as small meat or cheese cubes, vegetable sticks and fruit chunks teach coordination to children. Finger foods are a good way to introduce new foods.
- **Learning eating skills can be messy.** Encourage children to help you clean up spills. Place a drop cloth or old shower curtain on the floor to make cleanup easier. Have paper towels and a sponge handy. A spill is not a catastrophe, but rather an opportunity to help children learn.

Make Foods Appealing

Children have definite food preferences. The following guidelines may make the foods you serve more appealing to the children in your child care program.

- **Consider food temperature.** Most children do not like very hot or very cold foods.
- **Consider food texture.** Vary textures — crunchy, crisp, smooth, creamy. Children often dislike lumpy or stringy foods. Avoid overcooking vegetables.
- **Consider food color.** Serving foods of different colors makes a meal more interesting and appealing.
- **Serve foods of different shapes.** Choose round crackers or cherry tomatoes. Cut sandwiches into triangles. Serve square chunks of cheese and apple wedges.
- **Balance food flavors.** Consider foods with sweet, salty, sour, tart, spicy and mild flavors.
- **Include some well-liked foods in every meal.** Choose healthy foods that are familiar to children.
- **Introduce new foods with familiar foods.** Introduce only one new food at a time.
- **Serve a new food several times.** The more chances children have to try a new food, the more likely they are to accept it. Compare the new food to foods that are already familiar to a child. Offer the new food to a child who enjoys trying new things; other children will follow this child's lead and try the food.
- **Go easy on fruit juice.** Fruit juice is a healthy choice but should be offered only in small quantities. When children drink too much juice, they may get full and miss the nutrients they need from other foods.

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