

Memorable Mealtimes: Putting it all Together

When the goal is to help children eat well today and learn eating habits that will last a lifetime, mealtimes take on a new meaning. We are no longer focused on getting through the meal or hurrying to the next activity or taking that much needed break while the children eat. We put our own distractions aside and focus on what is best for the children. The good news is that meeting our goal and making mealtimes pleasant go hand in hand. Adults set the expectations and tone of the mealtime. With a few simple tips, mealtimes can be the highpoint of the day for both us and the children in our care.

Creating the Mealtime Environment

The first step to great mealtimes with children is to think about what makes a great meal: good food, good conversation, and a relaxed and pleasant environment. Next, we want to think about what could get in the way of that perfect picture. As we work with children, we can begin to anticipate the challenges that might make mealtimes less than perfect. We know that food needs to be pleasing and needs to be ready on time. We know that children can be easily distracted. They may want to get up and down from the table and some forms of active play and loud talking may not be appropriate at the table. We also know that children are just learning their eating skills and that spills are to be

expected. Once we anticipate these challenges, we can take steps to minimize how they affect mealtime.



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Set the Stage for a Great Mealtime

Children need to know what to expect at mealtimes.

Children come to child care from a variety of homes and backgrounds. As we plan for a great meal, we need to help children understand what to expect at mealtimes in our child care setting.

Children learn eating skills between 3-6 years of age.

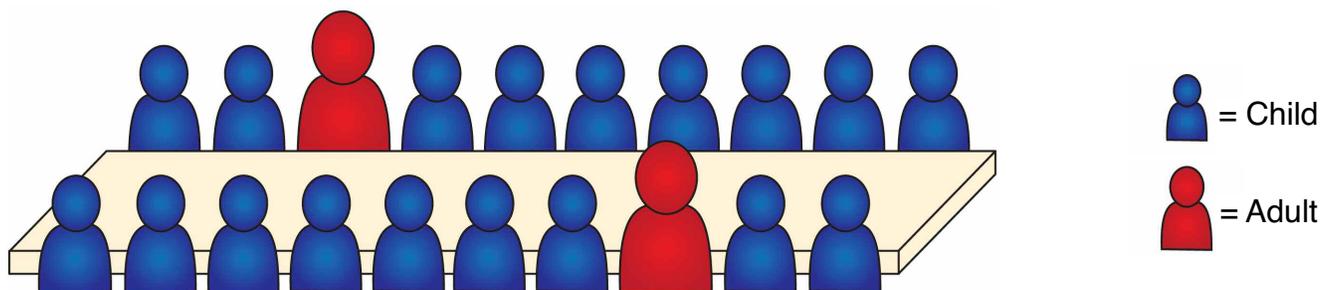
Young children's eating skills and manners develop over a long period of time. Young children benefit from practice using serving spoons, scoops, tongs, and pouring skills in the child care setting before they need these skills at the table.

Children benefit from a transition from active play to mealtimes.

Children often need to shift gears from playing before they can focus on eating. A pre-meal routine makes the perfect transition from active play to mealtime. Quiet, calming activities make this transition easier. Transition activities before a mealtime can include: circle time, reading a story, listening to music, singing, making flower arrangements for the table (with silk or fresh flowers), setting the table, or helping with meal preparation activities, and hand washing.

Adults can anticipate where children should sit during the mealtime.

We often allow children to choose their own places at the table and then realize that some children need more assistance or supervision than others. Mealtimes are more pleasant and relaxing if we anticipate what children will need before the meal and ask children to take specific places at the table. As you get to know the children, you will realize which children will need assistance in serving or eating, which children will feel more comfortable having you near, and which children will need your attention to re-direct their behavior during the meal. When more than one adult is eating with a large group of children, it makes sense for the adults to position themselves at different ends of the table so conversation and supervision is easy.



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How food is served makes a difference in what children want to eat.

Different child care settings have different styles of meal service. Some settings offer pre-plated meals where food is served to the children. Other settings serve meals cafeteria style where children go through the cafeteria line. A third serving style is to offer foods family style. Family style meals are served in serving bowls and children pass bowls and serve themselves.

Children eat best when the mealtime is relaxed and they feel in control of their eating. Adults actually control the food choices, behind the scenes, by planning healthy menus. Children feel in control when they are free to choose what they want to eat and how much they want to eat from the healthy foods that are offered. This can be accomplished with any of these styles of meal service.

Family style meals are considered best practice in child care because they offer children the most control over their eating. Children can choose to take the foods they want, can refuse a food, or can take a small amount to try. The children can change their minds during the meal and ask for a food if they want more. Both pre-plated meals and cafeteria style meals can be modified to offer some of these advantages if children are allowed to ask for larger or smaller serving, refuse foods they don't want, and request second servings if they change their minds or would like additional food.

Mealtime conversation is the key to a successful meal.

Good conversations make the mealtime pleasant and relaxed. Skilled adults can start the conversation and then let children talk more than they do. Our job is to draw the children out and use our questions and enthusiasm to keep the conversation going.

Although we want to draw the children's attention to the foods offered and encourage children to try each food, we don't want to pressure or bribe children to eat or eat certain foods. An easy way to start the meal is to review what is being offered and mention what looks particularly good today. For example, "Look we are having peas and potatoes with our chicken and biscuits today. Don't the peas look good? They are so bright and green. Oh, and we are having mashed potatoes. What is your favorite kind of potato? Does your family like them fixed in other ways?" Conversations about where foods come from, colors, textures and flavors and similar foods all help children focus on the foods that are offered at the table.

If a child is not eating a food, it may help to draw the child's attention to the food with a positive comment. For example: "Jimmy, did you want any of the peas, they are really good today" or "I see Mary is really enjoying her peas." Avoid any negative comments about how much or which foods a child is eating. Most children consider this pressure to eat something they did not want or to eat more of a food than they wanted.

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Once we have drawn the children's attention to the foods that are being offered, the conversation should move on to other topics of interest. Most of the mealtime conversation should be focused on the children's interests.

Conversation Starters:

What did you do this weekend?

What is your favorite color?

What was your favorite activity from this morning?

If you could be an animal, what would you be and why?

What animal do you think can jump the highest?

What animal has the biggest feet?

Controlling distractions during meal and snack times help children eat well.

Keeping the children engaged in the mealtime conversation and staying focused on the meal and eating goes a long way toward making the mealtime pleasant. Adults need to avoid being drawn into conversations with other adults because children will lose interest in the mealtime and eating. Distractions like parents picking children up, plans for the next activity, the need to be the first one to leave the table to get a favorite book or toy all shorten the mealtime and distract children from eating well.

Minimize noise and distractions such as activities in other rooms, television or radio playing, or vacuuming.

Prepare children for the end of a meal to assure they eat until they are satisfied.

Some children eat quickly and some children eat slowly. Children who eat quickly can enjoy the mealtime conversation after they have eaten what they want. Children who eat slowly sometimes need a reminder that the meal is coming to an end. Adults can remind children that "we are almost done with lunch, so you will want to eat what you want to last you until snack time. We have another 5 minutes." Some children may need a second reminder to assure they know when the meal will be ending.

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Have all of the children stay at the table until everyone is finished. If children are allowed to leave the table, they will miss out on conversation. Children leaving the table could be a signal to the other children that the meal is over. Also, if some children leave the table and move on to other activities, an adult must leave the table and accompany them, leaving fewer adults to participate in the mealtime.

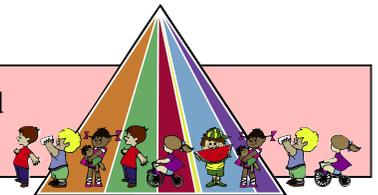
We've discussed that creating a mealtime environment sets the stage for a great meal. Simple tips go a long way toward helping children eat well today and learn eating habits that will last a lifetime.



Creating Happy Mealtime Tips

- Children understand what's expected at mealtimes.
- Children are learning eating skills.
- A transition is planned from active play to mealtimes.
- Adults anticipate where children should sit.
- How food is served makes a difference.
- Mealtime conversation is the key to a successful meal.

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Recipe to try

Vegetable Chili D-26¹

Vegetable oil	2 Tbsp	No. 3 bulgur wheat	1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups 2 Tbsp
Fresh onions, chopped	1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups	Water	2 cups
OR	OR	Lowfat plain yogurt	2 cups
Dehydrated onions	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup	Reduced fat cheddar cheese,	1 qt 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups
Fresh green peppers, chopped	$\frac{3}{4}$ cup 2 Tbsp	shredded	
OR			
Frozen green peppers	1 cup		
Chili powder	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup 2 Tbsp		
Cumin	2 Tbsp		
Granulated garlic	2 tsp		
Onion powder	1 tsp		
Red hot sauce (optional)	2 tsp		
Brown sugar, packed	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup		
Canned crushed tomatoes	1 qt 2 cups		
Canned diced tomatoes in juice, drained	1 cup 1 Tbsp		
Canned kidney beans, drained	1 qt 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups		



Heat oil in a heavy pot. Add the chopped onions and saute 3 minutes, until onions are translucent. Add chopped green peppers and saute 2 minutes, until tender. Add chili powder, cumin, granulated garlic, onion powder, red hot sauce (optional), brown sugar, and tomatoes. Simmer 15 minutes, uncovered. Add kidney beans, bulgur wheat, and water. Simmer 15 minutes, uncovered. Add yogurt and stir to blend. CCP: Heat to 135 °F for at least 15 seconds. Sprinkle $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of cheddar cheese on top of each serving.

Number of servings: 25

Serving size: $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6 oz ladle) provides 2 oz of cooked lean meat, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of vegetable, and the equivalent of $\frac{1}{4}$ slice of bread

¹USDA Recipes for Child Care. Available online at www.nfsmi.org.

Sources

National Food Service Management Institute. (2004). *More than mud pies: A nutrition curriculum guide for preschool children (4th ed)*. University, MS: Author.

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U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Nutrition Service, & National Food Service Management Institute. (2005). *USDA recipes for child care*. Retrieved January 11, 2008, from <http://www.nfsmi.org>

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