

Family style dining

Serving meals and snacks family style provides young children with the opportunity to engage in pleasant and positive mealtime experiences while encouraging them to respond to their internal cues for hunger and fullness. Research shows that children tend to serve themselves smaller portions than when adults serve them and that they tend to eat more of what they have taken. When caregivers sit down to eat with children at snack or mealtime, they model healthy behaviors by trying new foods and engaging in conversation with the children. Evaluation of resulting benefits shows that this not only affects children's health behaviors, but improves their language literacy skills as well.

There are a few key elements to consider for successful implementation of family style dining. Providing appropriate child size utensils, plates, pitchers and glasses is an important first step. Allow children to practice ahead of time in play situations, perhaps using sand or water to pour or scoop so that they can develop confidence in their skills for serving themselves. Be aware that spills are going to happen so have paper towels handy for easy cleanup. Supervision of children during mealtimes is essential for their safety and for supporting positive mealtime experiences. Teachers should sit with the children and encourage conversation. Without pressuring them to eat, think of some positive, inviting ways to talk about the food.

What are some examples of comments that might be shared during snacks or meals? What are other ways you might serve as a role model at mealtimes?



Establish a routine for meals and snacks to help children know what to expect. Provide placemats or place cards with the children's names and/or pictures on them to let children know where to sit. Look for opportunities to involve the children whenever possible, whether it is with table set-up, passing the food or cleanup. If lunches and snacks are brought from home, consider having children pass plates and utensils to give them the experience of putting their food on a plate rather than eating out of a lunch box.

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Be prepared ahead of time for the possibility of a child accidentally eating out of a serving bowl by placing small amounts in each serving bowl and having extra utensils on hand to avoid crosscontamination. Two necessities for successful implementation of family style dining are to be aware that the process will require patience, and to resist the urge to rush children. Keep the cleanup process simple by encouraging children to clear their plates and transition to a quiet activity when finished. This will allow those requiring more time to eat to do so without feeling rushed. Finally, consider how to educate and encourage families to build on these efforts by serving meals family style at home.



"It's amazing what they're able to do once you learn how to teach them how to do it."

Elana, Child Care Provider

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