

Making the Most of Meal Times

As a provider, your job is to provide a variety of nutritious, tasty foods in a relaxing atmosphere. Here are some tips to help you make the most of your meal times.

Family Style Dining

Family-style dining is one strategy that helps create a pleasant meal time. In family-style dining, the food is placed in serving bowls on the table. Providers sit with the children and food is passed from child to child with your help. To make family style dining more successful:

- Have meals and snacks ready and on the table before children are seated.
- Use small pitchers for milk or juice, adult size cereal bowls as serving bowls and child-size serving utensils.
- Allow younger children to serve themselves bread, crackers or other foods that are easy to pick up.
- Have children help you set the table for meals and snacks. Glue a place setting onto a piece of cardboard for the helpers to use as a model.
- Consider each individual child's abilities. Some children may be able to serve themselves some foods independently, but may need help with other foods.
- Seat children who may need more help serving themselves near adults
- Expect spills! Stay calm and have paper towels within easy reach of children so that they can help clean up messes.



Encourage children to eat a variety of healthy foods

- Ask parents about their child's experience with various foods.
- Serve a variety of foods, including new foods.
- Share the same meal, showing enthusiasm for new foods.
- Draw attention to the food that is offered. Encourage children to try each food.
- Never pressure or bribe children to eat certain foods.
- Do not focus on which foods a child has chosen or how much a child has eaten.
- Recognize and respect cultural eating differences.

Engage children in pleasant conversation during meals

- Speak quietly with the children and give them your full attention.
- Focus on the positive. It is not the appropriate time to argue, fight, scold or bring up misdeeds that may have been committed before the meal.
- It is also not the most appropriate time for you to teach concepts. Instead, think of yourself as a hostess or host of a dinner party. Facilitate children's conversations. Telling children to "Eat and be quiet" denies them the perfect opportunity to practice their social and verbal skills.
- Encourage children to take small servings, never forcing them to eat all the food on the plate.
- Allow children to leave the table if they do not like the food being offered or do not want to eat. Have a specific, quiet activity ready for these children nearby.
- Avoid using food to reward, comfort or punish children. It promotes unhealthy relationships with food.
- Respond calmly when children spill and encourage or help them to clean up.
- Ask children if they have had enough to eat, or remind them when the next meal or snack will be offered if the meal is about to end and they have only eaten a small amount.



Use open-ended discussion starters like:

- *What was your favorite activity this morning? Why?*
- *What would you like to do later today? Why?*
- *If you could be an animal, what would you be and why?*
- *What clothes do you think we will need to wear when we go outside?*
- *What was your favorite part of that book we read?*
- *To me, this food tastes like _____. What do you think?*
- *I like the taste of _____ more than _____. What about you?*
- *Last night for dinner/this morning for breakfast I had _____. What about you?*