

TAKE ACTION!

Nutrition Environment



MEALTIME ENVIRONMENT

recommendation

Make meal and snack time positive, cheerful and relaxing.

why?

Mealtime is a great way to help children develop positive attitudes about healthy foods, learn appropriate mealtime behavior and improve communication skills. Young children's appetites often vary day to day and their tastes may change overnight. Adults help children stay in touch with their internal hunger and fullness cues.

sample policies

- Meals and snacks are served in a safe, clean and pleasant setting that provides children with a relaxed and enjoyable environment. *This is a place where children have:*
 - enough space to eat
 - child-sized dishes and utensils
 - pleasant conversation
 - access to hand washing stations before meals and snacks
- Television viewing is not allowed during meal and snack times.
- Mealtimes are scheduled after physical activity to encourage eating and improve children's behavior.

cultural competency tip:

Mealtime is a great time to learn about some of the routines and traditions children take part in at home and the foods they eat. Invite families to join their children at mealtime so they can contribute to a positive atmosphere that reflects their cultural identities, and to observe and share in the routines and traditions of other children at the center. Mealtime is also a great time for families to share stories about themselves and their cultures, so children can get to know one another and how they are both alike and different. Allowing families to contribute to the mealtime environment will create a welcoming environment that embraces the cultural diversity of children and their families.

"To involve families with menus, encourage them to share ideas and have times when [they can] attend lunch to help teach children good eating habits." – Tammy Conner, Family Child Care Center, Ladysmith

how?

- Include predictable routines at mealtimes for children, such as washing hands before coming to the table, assisting with setting plates and utensils, and cleaning up after meals
- To teach your child how to recognize when hungry or full:
 - ask if the child's tummy is hungry when he or she wants to eat
 - ask the child to touch its tummy to show where hunger or fullness is felt
 - ask if the child's tummy is full at the end of a meal
- Children should be reminded to chew food completely. Their bodies need time to realize they have had enough to eat
- Let children learn to listen to their internal hunger cues. Do not require a clean plate, and allow seconds if desired
- Talk about foods being served and their tastes, smells, textures, colors and nutritional benefits. For example, when eating strawberries talk about the bright red color, the bumpy, seedy texture, the sweet smell and taste, or the shape like a heart or triangle. Add that strawberries can help them grow strong and stay healthy
 - Ask children to talk about their favorite foods
 - Create a positive environment. Do not discipline or scold children at mealtime
 - Food should not be used as a punishment or reward at any time. Children often place a higher value on attention, praise or thanks than on food
 - Turn off the television or any other distracting device during mealtime to promote a focus on eating
 - Encourage families to have their child take part in mealtime tasks at home

recommendation

Serve meals and snacks family style, which allows children to serve themselves at the table, when developmentally ready, from common platters of food.

why?

- Serving family style meals creates an opportunity for children to practice pouring, serving and passing skills, and table manners. These also can be practiced at home.
- Allowing children to choose their own portion sizes may help prevent overeating or feeling pressured to eat unwanted food.

Division of Responsibility

When feeding young children, it is the caregiver's job to decide what to buy and prepare, and when and where to serve meals. It is the child's job to decide whether to eat and how much. Children will learn to try new foods, respect their fullness cues and develop lifelong healthy eating habits.

how?

- Make the change gradually by starting with snack or 1-2 menu items at meals
- Talk about new foods being offered and discuss how foods grow, their color, shape, texture, etc.
- Use child-sized serving bowls, utensils and pitchers. Have extra serving utensils handy in case one is dropped on the floor or put in a child's mouth
- Provide child-size tables and chairs
- Expect spills as a normal part of the learning process
 - if there is a spill, have the children help clean up. Make cleanup fun. Children should not feel bad about spilling
 - use paper towel as placemats to help absorb spills
- Provide each menu item in several small bowls so that if a child touches the food, it can be thrown away with limited waste
- Encourage families to eat together as often as possible and have children take part in mealtime tasks at home

"I have had great success with putting all the foods on the table and letting the children take their own servings, instead of me filling the plates and handing them out. The children are open to trying new foods when they can control the situation."

– Rachael Jonet,
Maple Street Family Day Care,
Luxemburg

sample policy

- Family style meals are served whenever possible because it is important for children to learn to serve themselves. Our role as caregivers is to provide nourishing food. The child's role is to decide whether and how much to eat. We will never force a child to eat.

ROLE MODELING

recommendation

Staff members should model healthy eating practices for children.

why?

From early infancy, children learn through their interactions with others. Young children follow examples so it is important for caregivers to be good role models. Children pick up on attitudes and behaviors, including eating habits.

“It is up to the staff to model and teach appropriate behaviors when eating and being open to tasting new foods. We see the difference we make when families tell us their child [used to] never eat vegetables or tuna and it is a good feeling.”

– Nora Rosch,
Roots & Wings
Child Care Center,
Salem

how?

- Children should see staff enjoying healthy foods and beverages throughout the day. Staff should not consume less healthy foods (especially sweets, soda and fast foods) in front of children
- Try new foods with the children. They will be more willing to taste an unfamiliar food if a trusted adult also is eating it. Compare experiences and talk about how the food looks, smells and tastes
- Praise children when they try or eat new foods. Praise serves as positive reinforcement and makes it more likely the behavior will be repeated
- Be consistent in your message — eat only what the children are eating. Children are quick to pick up when something is not “fair,” so do not create a double standard
- Engage children in conversation during mealtime about healthy eating habits. Discuss where foods come from and their health benefits
- Make schedules allowing staff to have their break during naptime, not mealtime
- Serve family style meals so staff can eat with children instead of serving the meal
- If meals are not normally prepared for staff, ask them to try at least a small amount of everything served to children
- Make mealtime expectations clear to staff during the hiring process. Teach staff the importance of role modeling and healthy eating
- Have staff taste test new menu items. Their support is important before serving them to children
- Remove soda machines from the facility. If this is not an option, relocate them to an area only accessible/visible by staff
- Invite families to eat with their child at mealtimes
- Encourage families to be healthy eating role models for their children
- Children learn from adults what foods to eat or not eat. Food comments should always be positive
- Staff are encouraged to learn about children’s culture, share their culture with the children, and engage in conversations about healthy foods and their favorite family meals.

Children tend to eat better when mealtime is shared with an adult.

sample policies

➤ The child care program recognizes the importance of adults as positive role models for children as they learn to live healthy lives. Staff members model behaviors for healthy eating and positive body image in the presence of children. They do not consume unhealthy foods and beverages (e.g., candy, soda) in front of children.

➤ While in the presence of children, adults do not eat or drink any foods or beverages other than those offered to the children.

recommendation

Make mealtimes both enjoyable and pleasant to promote healthy eating habits for picky eaters.

why?

It is normal for children to say no to new foods. It can take 10 to 15 times of being exposed to a food before a child decides if they like it or not. Some children are especially cautious about trying new foods, while others use food as a means of control. Use the strategies below to minimize struggles with trying new foods.

how?

- Encourage, but do not force, children to try and taste new foods
- Do not just offer “typical” child foods (e.g. hot dogs, macaroni and cheese or chicken nuggets)
- Have a taste-test when introducing a new food. Children can vote yes or no to liking the food and provide insight into why (taste, texture) they do or do not like the food
- Try to avoid mealtime power struggles. If a child refuses to eat what is served, make a gentle reminder of the next meal and/or snack
- Cut sandwiches, pancakes and waffles into fun shapes

- Dip it, spread it or top it. Serve dip with crackers, toast, rice cakes or cut-up fruit or vegetables. Some ideas are:
 - cottage cheese or plain yogurt dip
 - peanut butter or cheese spread
 - tomato sauce or applesauce topping
- Make foods fun and call finger foods playful names:
 - apple moons (thinly sliced)
 - avocado boats (a quarter of an avocado)
 - banana wheels
 - broccoli trees (steamed broccoli florets)
 - carrot swords (cooked and thinly sliced)
 - cheese building blocks
 - egg canoes (hard-boiled egg wedges)
- Invite children to be “Chefs in Training” and help with food preparation. Allow them to tear and wash lettuce, squeeze juice from oranges, stir batter or make fruit parfaits
- Maintain open communication with families. Welcome families to tell you about the foods they traditionally eat at home and their child’s experience with eating and trying new foods. Explain the program’s goals around healthy eating, and discuss and problem solve obstacles faced during mealtime
- Incorporate families’ favorite foods into your menus. Consider a healthy variation when applicable

“We had one child that was not very excited about the brussels sprouts we were having at lunch, but after trying them, he ate two helpings of them. His mom is one of our teachers and I remember him yelling over to his mom ‘I love brussels sprouts!’”

– Bridget Magadanz, ThedaCare Child Learning Center, Appleton

sample policy

- We will serve a variety of foods in creative ways that are appealing to children. We understand that picky eating is a common childhood behavior. We will encourage, but never force, children to try and taste new foods. We will do our best to make mealtimes an enjoyable experience and incorporate foods that reflect the diversity of our families’ cultures.

How to buy and prepare fruits & vegetables for taste-testing



Avocados: A ripe avocado will yield slightly to the touch. Avocados will ripen in a few days in a paper bag or on the counter. Do not refrigerate avocados. To prepare, wash and cut in half lengthwise going around the pit. Twist the two halves gently to separate. Wedge a knife in the pit and gently pull to remove it. Pull off the skin with your fingers and slice.



Sweet potatoes / Yams: Choose sweet potatoes that are firm with no cracks or bruises. To keep them fresh, store them in a dry, cool place. Do not store in the refrigerator. If stored properly, sweet potatoes will keep for a month or longer. At room temperature, they should be used within a week of purchase. Sweet potatoes can be eaten raw, e.g., sweet potato sticks, but are usually cooked or baked. They can be prepared like regular potatoes.



Kiwi: Kiwi is ripe when slightly soft to the touch and has a fragrant smell. Ripe kiwi can be stored in the refrigerator for up to seven days. If they need to be stored longer, put kiwis in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. To peel, cut off the top and bottom ends, and then peel down the sides with a vegetable peeler or knife.



Brussels Sprouts: Look for firm, fresh, bright green sprouts with tight-fitting outer leaves free from black spots. Buy young, small sprouts (about 1 inch in diameter). Do not wash or trim sprouts before storing them. To prepare, trim stem ends without cutting the base of leaves or the sprouts will come apart during cooking. The easiest way to cook is in the microwave but they can also be steamed, sautéed or boiled.



Spinach: Look for fresh, green leaves that are not limp, damaged or spotted. Leaves should be dull green on top and bright green on the underside. Wash under clean, running water. Serve raw or cooked, e.g., steamed, boiled, microwaved, sautéed or stir-fried.



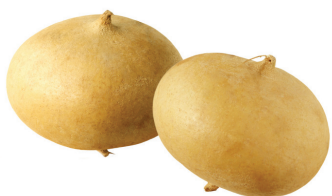
Mangoes: Should smell sweet and be soft when pressed. Color is not a reliable indicator of ripeness. To prepare, hold them upright and cut down along one of the flat sides, curving your knife to avoid the large oval pit. Repeat on the other side. Score-cut chunks of fruit from the peel. Trim the rest of the fruit off the pit and peel.



Pomegranates: Choose fruit that is brightly colored, plump and heavy. A pomegranate should not be firm but not too soft either. The skin should not have any blemishes or cracks. To prepare, cut off the crown (top) of the pomegranate. Score the rind in several places, but do not cut all the way through. Soak in cold water, upside down for 5-10 minutes. Break apart the rind under water and remove seeds. Strain the seeds from the water. Store seeds in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to two days.



Beets: Fresh beets should be firm, round and smooth with no soft spots. To prepare, cut off the stem and root, wash and scrub thoroughly. The red stain from beets is permanent, so cover work surfaces with wax paper. Beets can be boiled, roasted or steamed. If you roast them unpeeled they can be eaten like a baked potato.



Jicama: Buy jicama with the root attached and when it is firm and skin is unblemished. Large jicama are usually not as flavorful as smaller ones. To prepare, peel the light brown skin with a vegetable peeler. Do not eat any of the skin or the flesh right under the skin; both are tough and inedible. Cut the jicama in half. With cut side down, cut thin sheets or sticks. Jicama can be eaten raw, or cooked, e.g., steam, roast, bake, broil, or mash.



Kohlrabi: Look for small bulbs of kohlrabi — about 3 inches in diameter or less — for a sweeter, more tender flavor. Larger kohlrabi bulbs tend to be woody. To prepare, cut off the leafy stalks and scrub kohlrabi bulbs clean. Wash and peel before slicing. Kohlrabi can be cut into wedges and served raw, or cooked by steaming or boiling.



Asparagus: Look for smooth skin, bright green color, compact heads and freshly cut ends. Thickness in no way indicates a lack of tenderness. Poorly or long-stored thin asparagus can be tough and flavorless; fresh, fat spears can be remarkably sweet and tender. To prepare, trim off stem ends. Asparagus can be roasted, grilled, steamed, boiled or pan-roasted.



Eggplant: Select eggplants that are relatively heavy for their size, with skins that are smooth, taut, and shiny. Tan patches, scars, or bruises on the skin are signs of decay underneath. When you press an eggplant with your thumb, it should feel firm and bounce back. The fuzzy caps and stems should be green and free of decay and mold. Eggplant is usually not eaten raw; instead it is best when fully cooked; e.g., grill or roast.



Squash: Choose squash that are firm and fairly heavy for their size, otherwise they may be dry and cottony inside. Look for squash that have bright, glossy exteriors and do not buy when they have nicks or bruises on their skins or soft spots.

Summer squash varieties are immature squashes, usually small in size, with a soft skin, white flesh and crunchy texture. They are 100% edible, seeds and all. Zucchini is the most popular variety. Summer squashes have high water content so when you prepare them do not overcook or they will turn to mush. Overcooking is probably why so many kids hate squash!



Winter squash varieties are fully mature squashes, usually larger in size, with a hard outer shell and a long shelf life. They are always eaten cooked and are best prepared baked or roasted. Acorn, spaghetti and butternut squash are the most popular variety.