

Tip Sheets

Family Style Meals

The Importance of Family Style Meals

Family style dining is a mealtime approach that child care programs can implement to help support children with healthy eating and developmentally appropriate behavior.

Family style dining involves:

- Placing all food for the meal on the table.
- Children and adults setting the table, sitting, and cleaning up together when dining.
- Encouraging children to serve themselves independently (adults can help).

Family style dining is important because it:

- Reinforces learning and development.
- Exposes children to mealtime practices.
- Encourages social interaction.
- Instills lifelong healthy habits.
- Can help prevent childhood obesity.

Benefits of Family Style Meals for Children

Eating a variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean proteins is important for a child's healthy brain and body development. Children lacking proper nutrition risk developing an unhealthy body weight, poor self-image, diabetes, increased blood pressure, and heart disease, among other issues.

Not only do children benefit from consistent routines, but research shows that family style dining has the ability to influence children's healthy eating habits that last a lifetime because children are more likely to try new fruits, vegetables, and whole grain

foods when they see peers and adults eating and enjoying these foods.

Mealtime conversations between adults and children can help develop a child's vocabulary, model language use, and enhance peer and adult interactions. Families may even discover that children are more eager to try new foods and contribute to meals at home when they have positive exposure as well as a role to play.

Family style provides children with opportunities to:

- Try healthy foods.
- Practice serving correct portion sizes.
- Recognize personal cues for feeling hungry/full.
- Develop positive food attitudes.
- Engage in enjoyable mealtimes.
- Learn and practice social skills such as cooperation and turn-taking.
- Build self-confidence and self-help skills.
- Gain independence.

Benefits of Family Style Meals for Adults

Providers are important to the success of family style meals. When sitting with children during family style meals, adults:

- Set an example for eating and enjoying healthy foods.
- Engage children in interesting, language-building conversations.
- Create learning experiences to help develop skills used in family style dining.

Family style meals also help programs and caregivers budget food costs, reduce waste, and alleviate rushed transitions and hurried mealtimes.

How to Have Successful Family Style Meals

Preparing the program, adults, and children before implementing family style meal service is crucial for success. Like all areas of learning, adults are responsible for engaging and supporting children during meals and snacks.

Before meals

- Start simple, gradually introducing skills and strategies. It may take time for children to adjust to the new style.
- Don't give up. Examine what works and where changes can be made.
- Provide appropriately sized furniture, utensils, and items for children to help set the table and clean up spills.
- Fill several small dishes with the same food and only a few portions in each dish. Fill pitchers partially full to reduce spills.
- Plan extra for spills and contamination or second helpings with extra child-size utensils and servings of each food.
- Accommodate different skill levels by serving foods that meet children's fine motor skills (i.e. serve easy-to-grasp finger foods for toddlers). This reduces spills and waste and builds confidence and self-help skills.

During meals

- Demonstrate how to set the table, use utensils and serving dishes, and cleanup.
- Sit and talk with children while dining.
- Do not hold back or use food (or beverages) as a reward or punishment.
- Assist children in learning to serve themselves.
- Have children of varying abilities sit together to learn from watching one another.
- Encourage children to try foods.
- Respect the child's decision to decline a food. (Remember, children need to be offered the same food 10–20 times deciding they like it.)

- Honor a child's hunger and fullness cues.
- Offer a variety of different colors, flavors, textures, temperatures, and shapes to create interest and expose children to more foods.

To manage staff and family expectations, create and include a policy on family style meals in the program and parent handbooks. This is also a great way to help families use the dining style at home.

Cultural Sensitivity and Special Considerations

Programs may need serve certain foods due to health conditions, food allergies, or cultural preferences. Food substitutions can be individually plated or placed in individual serving dishes so children can serve themselves. Always consult with a child's family regarding any concerns as well as:

- Follow all medical care plan protocols.
- When possible, avoid separating children with special dietary needs from peers at mealtimes.
- Ask families for food preferences, traditions, and suggestions on how to prepare foods in ways that are served in their home.

Additional Resources

OCCRRA Family Style Dining Guide

<https://d3knp61p33sjvn.cloudfront.net/2016/02/FamilyStyleDiningToolkit.pdf>

Table Project: Family Style Dining Sample Menu

http://www.cditeam.org/table/family_style_dining/menus.htm

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.