

The Benefits of Family Style Dining and Best Practices for Mealtime Conversations

Tip Sheet

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“A supportive mealtime environment is important for fostering healthy eating habits in young children. Child care staff serve as role models for the children by trying new foods, eating the healthy foods served, and by avoiding bringing unhealthy foods into the classroom. Children are more likely to try new foods if they see an adult role model trying and liking a food. Additionally, mealtimes can serve as opportunities to talk informally with children about healthy eating and reinforce concepts learned during more formal nutrition education lessons”¹.

NAP SACC Best practice: Staff should join children at the table for meals.

Rationale: An important way for staff to serve as role models is to sit with the children and eat the same foods that the children are served. This time together provides an opportunity to educate children about healthy and proper table manners, talk about what they are eating and where it came from, and engage children in a pleasant discussion that can help nourish good human relations among the children. Children also tend to eat better when the meal is shared with an adult.²

Tips and Strategies³

- Help create schedules that allow staff to have their break during naptime, not mealtime. This will free up staff and enable them to eat with the children.
- Serving family style allows staff to sit down and enjoy the meal with the children instead of making up plates and serving seconds.
- Ask management staff to fill in and sit with the children during mealtime, especially in one staff classrooms when staff are sometimes focused on the next activity (e.g., setting up free play or setting out cots for nap).
- Invite parents into the facility during mealtime to eat with the children.
- Inform staff when they are hired that they are expected to be good role models. They can't expect a child to try a new food if they won't try it themselves. Include this in your staff policy.
- Involve staff with taste-testing new menu items to get their buy-in.

¹ NAP SACC, Consultant Technical Assistance Manual, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Page 37

² “ “ Page 37

³ “ “ Page 38

NAP SACC Best Practice: Always serve meals family-style

Rationale: Family style meals create an opportunity for children to practice their independence; pouring, spooning and passing skills; and table manners. Modeling and enforcing such behavior at child care facilities can foster habits that carry into other environments such as the home. Also, allowing children to select their own portion sizes may⁴ help prevent children from overeating.

Tips and Strategies:

- Assigning children jobs like setting the table, bringing food to the table, and clearing and cleaning the table after eating can actually make the staff's job easier. After the children get the hang of their duties, meals will run much smoother.
- Place food in serving bowls, allowing a serving bowl of each food item on each table. Set out child sized utensils like small tongs, small serving spoons, measuring cups (1/4 or ½ cups for fruits and vegetables and 1 cup size for main dish). Use small milk/water pitchers so that pouring is made easier for children. Smaller pitchers and serving bowls also minimize the likelihood of spills.
- Ask children to help with clean up after a spill, taking care to help them feel good about helping vs. feeling bad about the spill.
- Share some basic rules. Everything puts a bit of everything on their plate, and ideally tries everything. If there are limits to the first helping, e.g., take one tortilla, share them with children. If it is important to you, you may set rules where we wait until everyone is served before we begin eating. Help children determine how much they should take by eyeballing the table and deciding how to leave enough for the other children. Discuss with children the rules about touching food or touching the base of the serving spoon/cup/tong with their hands or mouths.
- Explain that family style meals can be done according to normal sanitation guidelines. Place each item in small bowls so if a child touches the food directly it can be discarded with limited waste.
- Allow children to serve themselves (with help from staff if needed) whenever possible.
- Allow children to choose how much food to serve themselves or if they take any food at all.
- The teacher sits at the table with the children
- Teachers eat the same food as children eat. Ask the staff to take and consume a small amount of everything served and avoid negative comments in front of the children about foods they don't like.
- Give staff short "coffee" breaks outside of the classroom and ask them to consume only water or the beverages served to children during meal and snack times in the classroom.
- Make these expectations clear to staff when they are hired or present policy changes at staff meetings and ask for everyone's cooperation.
- Remove soda machines from the facility to discourage staff from drinking soda in front of the children.

⁴ NAP SACC, Consultant Technical Assistance Manual. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Page 39

- Work with staff to understand that role modeling healthy eating is much like role modeling other things like polite communication (saying please and thank you, not interrupting others when talking) or speaking in a volume appropriate to the circumstances – quieter inside vs. outside. Most staff would not think twice about the importance of modeling these behaviors.
- Remind staff to think about strategies they may have used with their own children to influence healthier eating habits. They are probably spending as much time during meals with the children as many of the children’s own parents.

Child Benefits of Family Style Dining⁵

- Problem solving – figuring out who has the potatoes instead of just yelling for the Teacher
- Cooperation (who goes first, passing serving bowls to the next child, being careful not to serve too much food to one’s self and not leaving food for others)
- Responsibility (I am responsible for serving myself and eating until I am full)
- Increased dexterity and small muscle development as well as eye hand coordination (as they serve themselves using spoons, cups, tongs and pitchers)
- Culture – exposure to how some families eat meals
- Patience and a more relaxed focus (waiting for a turn, waiting till everyone is served, waiting for the teacher to refill bowls, etc.)
- Language development (identifying and describing foods)
- Manners (please, thank you, waiting a turn, etc.)
- To be a more active participant in the process and in their environment
- To utilize social skills, help out a friend and to use language to get their needs met
- To associate quantities of food with their level of physical hunger
- Enhanced self-esteem from experiencing independence and more control of their choices
- Math skills: quantities, counting, measuring, comparing, mentally dividing the amount of children, one to one correspondence etc.

NAP SACC Best Practice: Staff should talk with children about trying and enjoying healthy foods.

Rationale: Adults can mold children’s eating habits simply by talking about what food the adult enjoys and what food the adult dislikes. Children will gain appreciation for healthy foods and become more willing to try them if staff talk about trying and enjoying the food. Staff can teach children about the tastes, smells, textures and different colors and shapes of healthy foods, especially while sitting down for meals together. Nothing squelches a child’s enthusiasm for trying a new food more than an adult who turns up their nose at the same food!⁶

⁵ NAP SACC Training, Nutrition and Healthy Eating.

⁶ NAP SACC Consultant Technical Assistance Manual, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Page 41.

Tips and Strategies:

- Staff should not lie to the children. If you do not like a food, just don't say anything about it-positive or negative.⁷
- Most foods have one good thing that can be said about them. Talk to children about which food group the new food falls into or ask them to describe why the new food tastes good and to describe the new food-is it smooth, crunchy, sweet, juicy, or colorful?⁸
- Talk about Go (healthy foods we should eat a lot of or eat everyday) and Whoa Foods (foods that we eat sometimes, but probably shouldn't eat daily).
- Introduce food groups from My Plate (protein, grain, fruits, vegetables and dairy).
- Introduce the senses when discussing new foods. Describe the way it looks (color, shape, texture) the way it feels on our tongue or when we touch it, what does it smell like, how does it taste?
- Discuss sweet, sour, savory, salty and bitter. Discuss temperatures e.g., I'm thinking about something on my plate that is cold? Hot? Warm or room temperature?
- Discuss the origin of food. Where does it come from: Animals or plants? How is it processed? How is it prepared?

NAP SACC Best Practice: Staff should gently and positively encourage children to try a new or less favorite food.

Rationale: Good eating habits just don't happen- they must be learned. Child care providers can support positive eating habits by successfully introducing new foods and encouraging favorable attitudes toward food. Often children are more willing to try new foods when away from home, especially when they see other children eating those foods.⁹

Tips and Strategies:¹⁰

- Introduce new foods one at a time. Offer a very small amount at first; children will learn new flavors and textures without being overwhelmed.
- Offer new foods at the beginning of the meal when children are hungry and more likely to try something new.
- Enlist the help of an eager child who is usually open toward trying new foods. Children will be more willing to try a new food if another child has already tried it and liked it.
- Encourage, but don't force a child to try a new food. Children may be more willing to try a new food when there is no pressure and they are in control.

⁷ " " Page 41

⁸ " " Page 41

⁹ " " Page 31

¹⁰ " " page 31

- Tell parents about new foods their child may have tried at the facility and encourage them to try these same foods at home.

Best Practice: Staff should engage in pleasant conversation with children during meal times.

Rationale: *Children will enjoy a meal most if we create a pleasant, stress free atmosphere. Sitting with children and engaging in conversation is one way to ensure this. Young children learn about the world around them through their conversations with adults. Look at meal and snack times as an extension of the “learning”. Engage children in conversations that reinforce healthy eating and that tie back to your stories, circle times, art and science projects and other curriculum objectives. Conversing with children during meal times helps keep them focused and minimizes behavior issues.*

Tips and Strategies: Conversation starters at the table: Create an enjoyable dining experience with food conversation. If new staff are at a loss for conversation starters at the table or if you need a few reminders yourself, create and post a cheat sheet with words that prompt discussion.

- Engage children in a discussion about the senses. Talk about how food looks (color), how it feels (texture), temperature (hot, warm, and cold) and how it tastes (sweet, sour, bitter or salty).
- Talk about children’s likes and dislikes and their favorite foods. Ask about a food they loved the first time they tried it. A food they learned to like over time.
- Relate the food that you’re eating back to a story you read or a lesson you taught. For example, if you’re doing a lesson on community, talk to the children about farming or grocery stores or factories and how our food is grown, picked, prepared and sold. If you’re doing a lesson on trees, talk about what foods are picked off a tree. If you’re doing a lesson on farm animals, talk about what food comes from the milk of cows. If you’re doing a lesson on trucks, talk about how our foods get from the farm to the grocery store (and to the child care center).
- Link for children the relationship between food and health. Food helps us to grow taller and stronger. Food helps keep us from getting sick. Food gives me energy to play and keeps me from being sluggish. Food fills me up so my tummy doesn’t hurt.
- Engage children in a conversation about Go, Slow, Whoa foods. What do we have on our plate that we can eat every day? What foods are slow food or whoa foods: foods we shouldn’t eat every day.
- Take advantage of birthdays and holiday treats to talk about celebrating healthy and the frequency in which we can eat whoa foods.
- Use food as an opportunity to introduce math concepts. Discuss the shape of food, portion size, adding or subtracting peas or mini crackers.
- Take a minute to identify the specific foods in a soup or casserole. Talk about what changes when we add foods together.
- If your children are able: try to match foods on their plates to “food groups”.

- Share with children your favorite foods or your food memories. “My mom use to make this casserole; it’s always been a favorite of mine”.
- Introduce culture as it relates to the food the children are eating. What do children in Mexico eat? What about children in China? Japan? Ask the children, if they have special foods at home that are different from what we get here at the center/school.
- Ask about old and new foods. Who has tasted hummus before? Has everyone here had a clementine or a kiwi? Did anyone have eggs for breakfast this morning? How were they prepared? What kind of cereal did you have at home for breakfast?
- Test children’s memory, “Today we’re having hamburgers, can anyone remember what we had for lunch yesterday?” Or what is your favorite breakfast that (cook’s name) has made here at the center/school?
- Make up a story about the food on the table or retell a story about food (*Stone Soup*, *The Hungry Caterpillar*, *Eating the Alphabet*, *Cloudy with a Change of Meat Balls*, *Miss Spider’s Tea Party*, or *The Bernstein Bear’s Picnic*).
- All conversations do not have to center around food. Discuss the morning events, share the plans for the afternoon. Ask children about their morning or evening. Discuss the weekly theme.

Best Practice: Family Dining. A nutritious dinner is prepared at home, the family sits down together for the meal and everyone is focused and engaged in conversations with one another.

Rationale: The Benefits of family dining or the “family table” are well researched. In fact when families eat together at least five times a week, children benefit in these ways:¹¹ Be an advocate for family dining, sharing this research with the families you serve.

- Family meals improve dietary quality and promote healthy weight
 - Kids eat more fruits and vegetables and more calcium-rich foods
 - They ingest more vitamins and nutrients
 - They consume less junk food
- Family meals lower risk-taking behaviors
 - Kids who eat dinner with their families 5 times a week or more are less likely to take drugs, feel depressed, or get into trouble
- Family meals improve family relationships and emotional health
 - Kids are emotionally content and have positive peer relationships
 - They work hard in school
 - Family communication and family ties are strong.
- Family meals improve academic performance
 - Improved vocabularies and reading skills
 - Improved achievement test scores
 - Higher grades

¹¹ “ “

Most of these materials were either copied verbatim or adapted from the *NAPSACC Consultant Technical Assistance Manual*. University of North Carolina. <https://gonapsacc.org/> and the NAP SACC Training: *Growing Healthy Kids Together: Working with Families to Promote Healthy Weight Behaviors*. *The Conversation Starters section is a collection of topics typical of many classroom staff*. Permission was received from Go NAPSACC in October 2018 to reprint this material.