Encouraging self-help skills

Meal times are a great time for children to practice their self-help skills. Children can assist with setting and clearing the table and serving food. Consider some of the following strategies to encourage children’s independence:

- Encourage children to help set the table. Placemats may be created by the children, using pieces of artwork, photographs of the children and their families, or pictures of different foods. The placemats can also be labelled with children’s names. This will assist in children’s early reading development as they identify their own and other children’s placemats.

- Provide a small jug so children can pour their own drinks.

- Serve fruit on a platter and provide small tongs for children to serve themselves.

- If children bring their food from home, encourage them to open their own containers, food packets and to unwrap their sandwiches.

- Supply a small bin for children to dispose of their rubbish or food scraps.

- Provide a tub of soapy water for older children to rinse their dishes, or provide a safe stool for children to use at the kitchen sink.

- Give babies an extra spoon so they can practice feeding themselves.

- Encourage toddlers to help clean their faces and hands after meal times.

It is important to remember that when children practice their independence, there are likely to be mishaps and spills. If this occurs, try not to make a fuss, but encourage the children to clean up the mess themselves. Keep cloths and soapy water nearby for children to access if they spill anything.

Conversations during meal times

Talking with children is important at all times of the day and meal times are a good time for social conversations between children, as well as for you to talk with children and to ‘catch up’ on what is happening in their lives.
Meal times also provide natural opportunities to discuss nutrition with children. Encouraging children to eat healthy foods such as sandwiches and fruit before other snacks assists them to develop healthy eating habits. However, children should not be forced to eat as this can develop negative and unhealthy attitudes toward food. Explaining in simple language the benefits of healthy eating, while allowing children to choose how much they eat, will help to make meal times positive experiences.

Including multicultural experiences in meal routines
Meal routines provide many opportunities to learn about different foods and meal time practices. Children can experience foods from diverse cultures, particularly those of the children in care and the local community. Families may also be willing to share traditional recipes for children to cook and share.

You can also consider celebrating important days and holidays that the children’s families celebrate, many of which involve traditional foods. Find out as much as you can from children and their families to ensure you understand the importance of their celebrations and the types of activities they participate in.

Activity ideas using food
Using food throughout your program can teach children about where food comes from and how it is prepared. Cooking experiences are also opportunities for children to practice mathematical and science concepts.

Some simple ideas include:
- If you have fruit trees or a vegetable garden, allow the children to help you pick the fruit and vegetables and use them for meals
- Implement cooking experiences and support the children to measure, count, pour and mix the ingredients
- Allow children to assist in preparing meals and planning menus. Children may choose their sandwich fillings and which fruit they would like to eat.
- Involve children in excursions to shops to buy the ingredients for cooking experiences. Older children can practice their writing skills by preparing a shopping list, while younger children may be able to cut and paste pictures from magazines. Encourage children to assist with choosing the food items you need and discuss the nutritional value of the foods.

Communicating with families
Families often like to know what their children have eaten during the day. This is often particularly important for maintaining consistency between family day care and home, particularly for babies and younger children. While it may be appropriate to verbally describe what an older child has eaten to their family, it is often helpful to write this information down for parents of younger children.

Conclusion
Not only do quality meal time experiences help to ensure that children’s nutritional needs are being met, they also provide many opportunities for children to learn a broad range of skills. The learning that takes place during meal time routines can occur naturally and as part of a social occasion in which children are able to interact with each other and with you in a warm, unhurried and respectful atmosphere.

Family Day Care Quality Assurance
Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 3.4, 4.1 and 4.2

References and further reading

Useful websites
- Go For Your Life: www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au/kids

For more information on FDCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.
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