

Making meal times positive

by Megan Shaw

Meal times provide great opportunities for children to practice social, language and self-help skills. Allowing children adequate time to taste and enjoy their food, to make choices and to interact with others helps to make meal times pleasant, relaxed experiences for both children and adults.

Which aspects of meal routines can services consider improving?

Presentation of the room: The arrangement of furniture and setting of tables can affect how relaxed meal times will be. Arrange the tables to allow for small groups with, if possible, one adult at each table. Individual placemats for children, vases of flowers and table cloths can also assist to make the dining area more appealing. The children can help set the table and choose where the place mats go.

Self-help skills: Consider placing large bowls of food on each table for children to serve themselves, with adult assistance if required. If children bring their food from home, encourage them to open their own food packages and assist when necessary.

Of course, when children are encouraged to serve themselves, there will be spills. It is helpful to have a bucket of soapy water and cloths available for children to clean up their spills. When children spill food or drinks, avoid making a fuss, but encourage them to clean up the mess. At the end of the meal, older children may be able to scrape their bowls and rinse their cups, and assist with clearing the tables.

Interactions: Ensure that interactions are positive and allow opportunities for children to practice small group interactions. During meal times set all other tasks aside to allow for all carers to be present. It is important that adults sit and eat with children, to act as role models for healthy eating habits, and talk with children about what they are eating, where the food comes from and how it was prepared. For older children, conversations might include more complex information and concepts. For example, explain to children that eating pasta is healthy as carbohydrates will give them energy to play.

Variety of food: Children may not eat foods the first time you offer them. Keep offering

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 3.4, 3.5, 4.1 and 4.2

OSHCQA Principles: 2.2, 4.3, 5.3, 6.1 and 6.2

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.3, 4.2, 4.3, 5.4, 6.1 and 6.2

them in various ways, as the children may eat them eventually. Do not force a child to eat, or withhold food as a punishment. Children can determine when they feel full and forcing them to eat, or withholding food, is inappropriate and can create unhealthy eating patterns. Instead, give children positive responses about healthy foods they do like to eat and allow them to tell you when they have had enough.

Where possible, allow children to have input into the menu, explaining to them the foods that should be eaten every day, and which foods are 'sometimes foods'. Use a variety of colour in meals to attract the children's interest and consider using various utensils to go with the different foods.

Adapting meal times for children of different ages

Meal time routines need to be adapted depending on the ages of the children and the setting of your service. Meal times in infant groups can be challenging as the routines of babies are often staggered. Younger children are also not going to be able to have as much input into the menu as older children. The following tips can help you to increase the enjoyment and relaxation that children and adults experience during meal times.

Babies:

- Give older babies finger foods to nibble on while you are feeding younger babies
- Arrange high chairs to allow for the children to see each other and interact while eating
- Provide older babies with an extra soft spoon so they can explore their food independently and practice feeding themselves.

Toddlers:

- To avoid rushing and creating a stressful atmosphere, allow about half an hour for setting the tables, so that children can help

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- Talk with the children as they set the table. For example, assist with counting out the number of bowls, cups and utensils you will need and talk about the colours of the items
- Provide choice for toddlers, but try not to overwhelm them. It is difficult for a toddler to make a decision if there are more than two or three options from which to choose
- Take a 'no pressure' approach to introducing new foods. For example, 'I'd love you to try the chicken – it's really yummy, but if you really don't want to, that's okay – maybe next time'
- Help children to identify the foods they are eating, and introduce simple songs and rhymes into meal routine experiences.

Preschoolers:

- Give children many opportunities to help set and clear the table and to serve their own meals. The children may be able to help draw up a roster for this
- Consider setting an area aside for morning and afternoon tea and allow children to go to this area when they are hungry for progressive, rather than set, meal times
- For children who are starting school soon, introduce packed lunches, similar to what they will take to school, and let them practice opening food packages and lunch containers
- Consider having 'lunch order' days, where the children are able to choose from various foods such as sandwich fillings, pieces of fruit and healthy snacks
- Talk with children about the food they are eating, and take time for general conversations and 'catching up' with children
- Involve children in setting some simple rules for health and hygiene at meal times.

School aged children:

- When children arrive early in the morning, they may not be ready to eat right away, so allow them time to settle and to decide when they would like breakfast. It is a good idea to set a

Tips for Family Day Care

Managing meal times can present particular challenges for carers. Some useful tips for positive meal times in family day care include:

- Having a well planned routine so that waiting time is kept to a minimum – for example, organise older children's meals before beginning to feed younger children
- Involve older children in helping to set up and clean up for meal times
- Have quiet activities available for older children to go to if they finish their meal while younger children are still eating.

'cut off' time for breakfast to ensure children eat in time to get to school

- After school, children are often very hungry, so make sure that they have access to food soon after arriving at the service
- Consider whether it is possible to split the children into smaller groups for meal times, and allocate one staff member to each group. Each group may have a different food choice and the children could move around the groups to eat a variety of foods
- Have meals indoors and outdoors, depending on the weather and the spaces available in your service
- Involve children in meal planning, preparing and serving
- Plan for meal times during excursions.

Conclusion

By carefully considering factors such as children's ages, the environment and daily routines, child care professionals can ensure that meal times form a valuable part of the daily child care experience, rather than being seen as something to 'get through' before moving on to the next activity ■

References and further reading

- Children, Youth and Women's Health Service. (2006). *NOSH – Nutrition ideas for out of school hours care programs*.
- Shimmin, S., & White, H. (2006). *Every day a good day: Establishing routines in your early years setting*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Useful websites

- Go For Your Life: www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au/kids
- Start Right Eat Right, South Australia: www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/startrighteatright.htm
- The University of Mississippi, National Food Service Management Institute: www.nfsmi.org