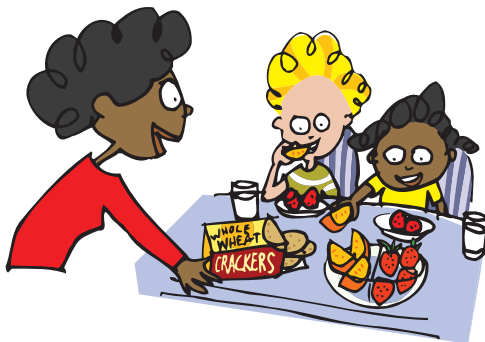


Supplement D: Create a Positive Meal Environment

Nutrition and Wellness Tips for Young Children: Provider Handbook for the Child and Adult Care Food Program



A child's eating environment may be as important as the foods he or she eats. While food nourishes children's bodies physically, mealtime serves as emotional nourishment. Positive interactions and patience are important, as is an engaging eating experience. Child care providers can promote positive attitudes toward food and create a friendly eating environment to help children form lifelong healthy eating habits.

How can I provide a comfortable and safe place for children to eat?

Plan your environment carefully, while thinking about the larger eating space, as well as the table-setting.* To create a pleasant environment when children eat meals and snacks, **you** can:

► **Provide child-sized tables and chairs.**

Adults may want to sit on low chairs or crates to keep from “hovering” over the children. Children will be more relaxed when adults are next to, but not above, them.

► **Provide child-sized dinnerware and utensils.**

- Purchase dinnerware and utensils made for young children or use smaller plates and bowls, like salad or dessert plates.
- Use non-disposable dishes, cups, and utensils that are difficult to break.

► **Create a more home-like environment.**

- Let children help set the table with small table decorations like a vase of flowers or seasonal gourds. This can also be a mealtime conversation starter.
- Have children make decorated name cards that can be laminated and re-used.

► **Plan for spills and easy clean-up.**

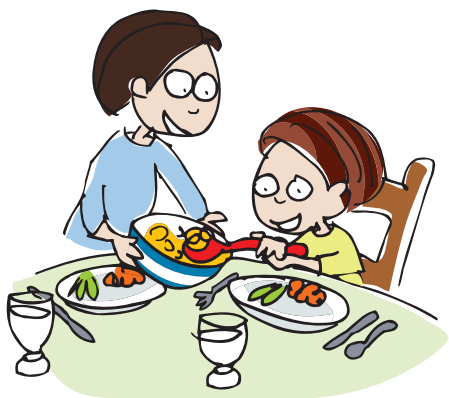
- Use cloth placemats or table covers along with, or instead of, plastic tablecloths. This will absorb liquids, *and sounds*, for a less stressful meal.
- When spills do occur, teach children how to help clean them up.

► **Before mealtime**, clear the eating area of materials used during other times, such as art supplies, books, etc.



* Be sure to follow local safety and sanitation regulations.





How can I make a smooth transition to mealtime?

Busy and active young children often don't want to sit and eat, so allow some time between high-energy activities and mealtimes. A calm transition to meals slows children down and helps them get ready to eat.

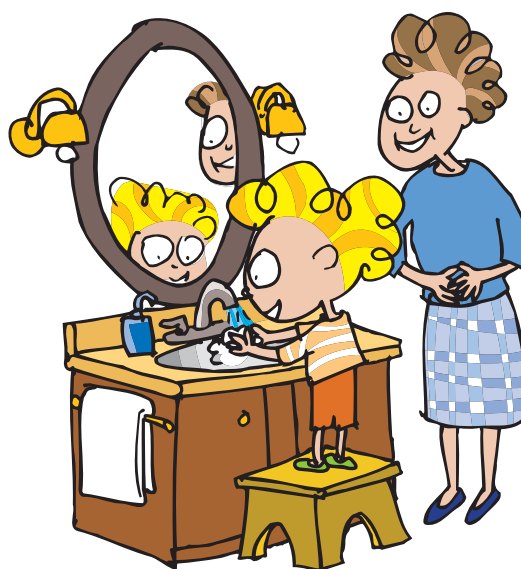
▶ Try some activities to help children slow down, such as:

- Coloring or drawing
- Playing with blocks
- Listening to soft music
- Reading a story
- Talking about the meal
- Preparing and setting the table

▶ **Tell children** a few minutes ahead of time that it will soon be time to eat.

▶ **Turn off any electronic devices** and keep them turned off during mealtime.

▶ **Use handwashing** as the first step of the meal. This will also encourage good hygiene.



How can I get children involved in mealtime?

Giving children a sense of independence at mealtime supports child development. Children of all ages can help prepare meals. When they are involved in meal preparation and share foods with others, they learn about food and feel a sense of pride.

Cooking with children requires patience. It can be messy and doesn't always exactly turn out the way the recipe intended! Once you make it a practice, you'll find the benefits of including children in meal preparation far outweigh any drawbacks.



more 'involve children in mealtime' tips on next page...



...more 'involve children in mealtime' tips

► **Allow children to help prepare various food items for a meal, with proper supervision.***

Age 2:

Two-year-olds are learning to use the large muscles in their arms.

Try letting them:

- **Wipe table tops.**
- **Move premeasured dry ingredients** from one place to another, or pour them into a bowl.
- **Wash and tear** lettuce and salad greens.
- **Carry** unbreakable items to the table.

Age 3:

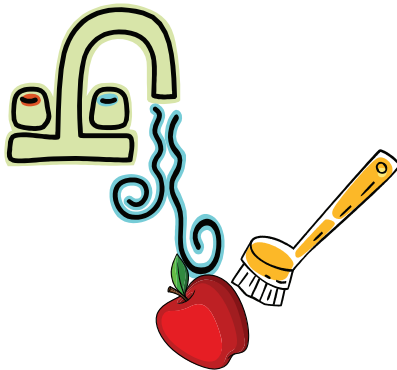
Three-year-olds are learning to use their hands. They can manage the tasks for age 2, and also:

- **Pour liquids** into a bowl.
- **Mix ingredients** such as batter (use an extra-large bowl to contain mess).
- **Spread soft spreads**, such as hummus or peanut butter, on firm bread.
- **Knead** dough.
- **Rinse** fruits and vegetables.
- **Wrap** potatoes in foil for baking.

Ages 4 - 5:

Children in this age group are learning to control smaller muscles in their fingers. In addition to all of the above, allow them to:

- **Scrub** firm fruit, like apples.
- **Form round shapes** (of dough or other soft foods) with hands.
- **Measure** dry and liquid ingredients.
- **Peel** loose-skinned oranges and hard-cooked eggs.
- **Beat** eggs with an eggbeater or whisk.
- **Mash** soft or cooked fruits and vegetables with a fork.



**Check with your State agency or sponsoring organization for specific food handling requirements in your community.*

► **Involve** children in pre- and post-mealtime activities. With supervision, invite them to help:

- Set the table.
- Bring food to the table.
- Clear and clean the table after eating.

► **Encourage** children to do as much as possible for themselves. First efforts are an important step toward growth.

Be patient, and be okay with messes. Think of it as an opportunity to teach about food safety and clean-up!



How can I make eating a pleasure for the children?

Remember that we eat with all of our senses! Serve foods in ways that are both pleasantly exciting as well as soothing to children's eyes, ears, touch, taste, and sense of smell.

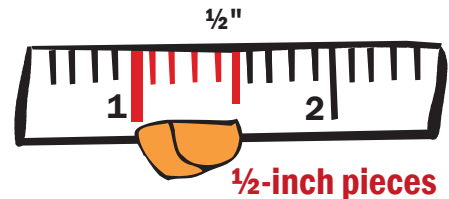


- ▶ **Keep it colorful.** Children like lots of different colors on their plates.
 - Offer different colored foods on the same plate, for example, chicken, carrots, green grapes, and whole wheat bread.
 - Try serving a colorful salad with green lettuce, purple cabbage, and sliced cherry red tomatoes.

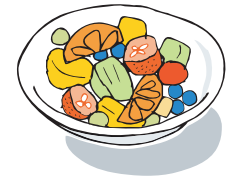


For children younger than 4 years old:

- **Cut raw vegetables in small pieces no larger than one-half inch (½") to prevent choking.**
- **Offer cooked or soft vegetables to younger children to prevent choking.**
- **Slice cherry tomatoes, grapes, and other round foods in half, and then cut into smaller pieces.**



- ▶ **Mix it up!** Children prefer when their plates contain a variety of foods.
 - Prepare different varieties of the same food in a dish, such as different shaped pasta. Foods like beans and peas offer many different fun shapes, colors, and textures.
 - Try serving a tri-colored bean salad for lunch.
 - Serve beans and peas as great finger foods for toddlers.
 - Offer hot and cold foods in the same meal, such as a hot entrée with a chilled fruit salad.
 - Serve food from other cultures to increase variety and teach about new foods. Have theme days with recipes and activities from different cultures.



For great recipe ideas, visit the What's Cooking? USDA Mixing Bowl Web site:

<http://www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/>

- ▶ **Encourage** positive feelings about eating.
 - Plan plenty of time to allow children to serve themselves and eat without feeling rushed.
 - Encourage children to take time to taste the food.
 - Let children follow their hunger cues and allow them to leave food on their plates if they are full. They may learn to overeat if they are told to eat everything on their plates.
 - Avoid using food as a reward (such as giving them a “treat” when they behave) or punishment (such as not allowing seconds if they spill their milk).

How can I be a good role model?

Children learn eating behaviors, such as what foods to eat and how much to eat, from their parents and other caregivers at home, as well as from child care providers.

Set a good example:

- ▶ **Sit with children** during meals and eat the same foods they eat.
- ▶ **Practice** good table manners.
- ▶ **Avoid labeling foods** as being “good” or “bad.”
- ▶ **Try new foods** in front of children and encourage them to try them too.
- ▶ **Keep** any negative experiences or feelings about food to yourself.
- ▶ **Focus on the meal** and stay engaged with the children. Avoid doing other tasks during mealtime.

Having “taste-test” activities outside of mealtime is a great way to let children explore food using all of their senses. Let them touch, feel, smell, and taste samples of food. They can also listen to cooking and food preparation sounds.

Try some of the taste-test ideas in "Grow It, Try It, Like It! Preschool Fun with Fruits and Vegetables." <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/grow-it>

Connect with Parents

- ▶ **Send the message home.** Share ChooseMyPlate.gov’s “Be a Healthy Role Model for Children” tip sheet with parents and other caregivers to encourage good role modeling at home too.
<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/ten-tips-be-a-healthy-role-model>



- ▶ **You’ll also find** great messages, tips and advice, and a Child Feeding Video for families on the USDA Food and Nutrition Service *Core Nutrition Messages Child Feeding* Web page. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/core-nutrition/child-feeding>



Activities

What are some specific ways I can create a positive meal environment in my child care program?

Which of these ideas will you try? Mark your choices.

- Make “Produce Placemats”** from *Grow It, Try It, Like It! Preschool Fun with Fruits and Vegetables, Booklet 1: The Basics*, page 29. http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/growit_book1.pdf
- Choose a new recipe** that has easy steps children can help with. Older preschoolers would enjoy following the “Look and Cook Recipes.” <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/discover-myplate-look-and-cook-recipes>
- Pick a special song** to play when preparing the table for a meal. When the children hear the song, they will know the meal is about to start and it’s time to help set the table. You can download the “Reach for the Sky” song. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/discover-myplate-nutrition-education-kindergarten>
- Provide colorful cloth napkins** that children can place on their laps (or tuck into their shirts) during meals and use to wipe their hands and mouths. You can buy these from a discount store. The sides of the squares can be folded over and sewn to keep from fraying when washed. Place them in a basket and have children choose one as they come to the table for a meal. After the meal, children can place the cloths in an appropriate basket for laundering.
- Include a “conversation starter”** centerpiece on the table. Use it to get children talking about recent activities or discoveries, ongoing projects, or for teaching new words. The centerpiece could be made from items such as objects found on a nature walk or structures built from blocks.
- Other ideas:**

