



## **Best Practices for Serving Foods to Groups of Children**

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### **PROVIDE SPACE**

Young children are learning to control their muscles, especially their hand muscles. They need plenty of space to balance food, drink, and eating utensils. Make sure there is adequate "personal space" for each of the children as they eat.

### **PROVIDE PRACTICE WITH CHILD SIZED UTENSILS**

Fine motor control is a major developmental task of young children. Strength, endurance, and control are minimally developed for using eating utensils. Help children increase skills by giving them plenty of practice with spoons, forks, knives, and serving utensils. Use child-sized eating utensils and equipment.

### **PROVIDE FOODS THAT CHALLENGE EATING SKILLS**

Offer foods to spread, cut, break, spear, or spoon from a bowl. This variety allows children to gain skills. Caution: expect children to have varying degrees of ability. Children should have lots of time and opportunity to PRACTICE these skills before competence is expected.



## **MAKE SURE ADULTS EAT WITH CHILDREN**

Adults are role models for using utensils, choosing and eating foods, and behaving in socially acceptable ways at the table. They help shape children's eating behavior. Adults elaborate and embellish on children's "food" vocabularies. Adults help children trust the eating environment by making sure they are safe both physically and psychologically.

## **HELP CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT FOOD BY ASSISTING THEM AS THEY PARTICIPATE IN PREPARING IT**

Children can participate in preparing food. They enjoy eating what they prepare. Children gain a sense of autonomy (self control) as a part of food preparation. This results in children feeling healthy control in their relationships with food and eating.

## **HELP CHILDREN LISTEN TO THEIR INTERNAL CONTROLS ON HOW MUCH OR WHETHER TO EAT**

Let children eat until they are full or satisfied, rather than setting limits about how much they eat. Sometimes we feed children in groups by using a principle of equality. This translates to the rule that each child gets an equal amount. Such equality is not fair. Fairness in feeding children should be based on letting the children's natural body cues tell them when they are full. What is fair is to trust that children will eat as much as they need.



## **TRUST CHILDREN TO EAT AS MUCH AS THEY NEED**

Resist forcing children to clean their plates. When people are forced to eat beyond what their brains tell them is enough, they learn to overcome their bodies' hunger and satiety cues. Be careful of subtle forcing, no matter how gentle or kind-hearted.

## **LET CHILDREN SERVE THEMSELVES**

Children waste less when they are given the opportunity to choose how much they will have. Let them serve themselves rather than depend on adults (who may heap food on unwilling children's plates). As children first serve themselves in family style service, they are begin to use skills for passing bowls and selecting amounts. Support children as they LEARN how to pass bowls without accidents and how to choose portion sizes that match how much they can eat.

## **FEED CHILDREN OFTEN**

Young children need to eat about six times a day. Schedule meals and snacks. The length of time that children may continue to eat should be flexible. Remember that some children, on certain days, take longer to eat than the group. In addition, remember that some foods take longer to eat than others. A ham sandwich takes longer to eat than a half cup of pudding!



## **SET THE ENVIRONMENT SO CHILDREN DO NOT WAIT TOO LONG.**

Since young children are learning to delay gratification, they have greater difficulty than older children in waiting their turns. They are working on the social skills of taking turns and sharing, as well as the omnipresent "table manners" so discussed in middle class families. In group settings where children serve themselves, be alert to how long children must wait to eat. Delay putting food and drink on the table until you are ready for the children to begin serving themselves. Offer enough bowls of food or pitchers of drink so that children have limited waiting periods.

## **PRESENT FOOD THAT IS COMMONLY KNOWN TO CHILDREN. RELATE NEW FOODS TO THOSE THE CHILDREN ALREADY KNOW.**

Prepare foods so they are recognizable to children. Avoid trying to be "cute." Some recipes for children inappropriately suggest making food into clown sandwiches or vegetable monsters in a misguided effort to attract children's attention. Children want routine and familiarity in their foods.