Cognitive Curriculum, Conversations, and Mealtimes
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Relaxed mealtimes and pleasant learning! How can we get there? Mealtime is a natural environment for rich, meaningful times together. Children get their stomachs filled and their brains stimulated by conversation. Try these strategies to help children learn.

Use wait time
Sometimes adults ask questions or make requests of a child, then the adult answers her own question, or takes over too quickly. Children need time to respond or to think of an answer. Wait for a child to respond to your comment or question. This may take 15 seconds or more. Wait, and you will be rewarded with pleasant give and take at the table. Sometimes a child will wait minutes before a coming up with a response. If a child brings a response back to the conversation, be ready to pick up the conversation.

Embellish children’s thinking and conversations
Help children embellish their thoughts about food, eating, and other table topics. Add adjectives or adverbs to the words they use. For example, if the child says, “I love soup.” You can help embellish that thought by saying, “We have vegetable soup today. It is warm and creamy. Some people love warm soup and some people like cool soup.”

Build vocabulary
Vocabulary at age three predicts reading success in later grades. Mealtime is a natural vocabulary-rich environment. Help children expand vocabulary for food, utensils, amounts, temperatures, measuring tools. Provide words as they arise in natural routines of the meal. Use the amazing topics that arise when people gather around a table. Intentionally introduce new vocabulary and frequently repeat the new words.

Clear up the “W” questions
The “w” questions are who, what, when, where and the much heard, “WHY?” Mealtimes are natural times for children to learn how to use these five similar sounding question words. Often young children will use “why” for all of the “w” words. Know that when children ask “why?” they may really want to know when something will happen. Or where? Or who? They may need help in knowing when to use the “w” question words. Help them learn to use “where” in relation to space and position as they place foods and bowls and glasses. Help them learn to use “who” as they think about passing bowls to others. Help them learn about “when” as they discuss what happens next and explain sequences of events around mealtime. “What” is a great question word for talking about food that is new to children. Use the words often and functionally.

Provide an environment where children’s ideas abound and curiosity lives
Help children know that you do not know all the answers. Food and eating are just right for sensory exploration. Use an attitude and voice that show children they can contribute their ideas to conversation. Model wonderment! You can say, “WOW, I wonder if…” Ask true questions, rather than offering questions for which you already know answers. A true question is one for which you do not know the answer.

Extend conversation, not dominate conversation
When children talk about food or activities at the table, enrich their vocabulary by extending conversations. Ask questions about their comments, or add comments about your experiences. Be careful not to dominate conversation. Draw other children in to enrich child-to-child talking. Get peers talking about how their experiences are alike or different.
Encourage Child to Child Conversation at Mealtimes

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At the table, children are powerful models for each other. Peers are often more powerful models than teachers. Their thoughts about food carry big weight with each other. The teacher role is effective in helping children develop skills for conversation with each other.

**Strategies for encouraging child to child discussions**

- Help children learn to know and call each others’ names.
- Teach children to look at each other as they make requests for food or utensils.
- Help children take turns in conversation, by speaking, then listening to what the other person says. Hint: Help children practice these skills using echo songs during group times. We sing, and then you sing.
- Show children how to wait for each other to answer.
- Sometimes a child will not respond to another child. Repeat the other child’s requests for food or utensils to the child. Then tell the child that another child is waiting to hear his/her thoughts.
- If children do not have words to carry out a conversation or make a request, suggest words for them to try.
- If the child to child conversation stalls, pick up the conversation by offering clarifying information, then toss the conversation ball back out to the children.
- Ask true questions for the children to answer and discuss. A true question is one where even you don’t know the answer.

**Extend child to child conversations**

Watch for opportunities to pick up what a child says. Toss the topic back on the table for children to discuss further. For example, Thomas says, “I like green beans. My grandma grew some. We picked them off the bush.” You say, “Thomas said he likes beans because he picked some off the bush. What do you think about that?”

**Interpret impolite table talk for learning opportunities**

Sometimes children bring up words that may be impolite for table talk. Children may delight in talking about blood, vomit, pooh-pooh, and other dramatic topics. Children may be teasing, but they are typically genuinely interested in questions about body functions, including digestion and indigestion! Rarely do young children bring up such topics or words just to be disgusting.

Because children are powerful and influential models for each other, such stimulating and interesting talk can spread rapidly among the children. These impolite topics hold their attention! An observant teacher will discern the intent of the talk. Then, the teacher will decide strategies to use to extend the talk or not, or even to stop the talk.