Mealtime Curriculum
Janice Fletcher, EdD and Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

Mealtimes are great natural environments for children to learn. Numbers, amounts, vocabulary, symbols, ideas, information...all of these are right there at the table.

Here are some ways to make intentional opportunities for children to learn:

**Literacy Strategies**

- Introduce new foods using a food display: include written labels.
- Write daily/weekly menus with children.
- Display menus near the table.
- Hang up pictures near the table with words and pictures of food and people eating.
- Encourage discussions about how the food at the table rhymes with other words and how the letters in the names of the food sound.
- Read books about eating and food and then serve the food mentioned in the books.
- Put written and pictorial signs on the entry door showing “what’s for lunch.”
- Write stories about food, using pictures of your mealtimes for story-starters.
- Make up songs and rhymes about your mealtimes.
- Offer child-sized clipboards where children can “write” about the food at the table.
- Make a graphical chart where children sign their names or make a mark indicating their thoughts about the food at the meal.
- Offer dramatic play props:
  - Restaurant props such as menus, order pads, and written and pictorial signs showing the food;
  - Grocery store props such as pads for writing grocery lists, materials for making signs for the name of the store or for advertising groceries, coupons, and boxes and cans for sorting by name or the alphabet;
  - Housekeeping props such a pads for writing menus, groceries to arrange by the letters on the can or box, written recipes in a box with some of the ingredient boxes for play, pads for writing namecards for setting the table.

**Mathematics Strategies**

- Make sequenced pictures of food preparation.
- Make scrapbooks and bulletin boards of favorite mealtimes.
- Have a fair where children bring foods to explore. Focus attention on the concepts of the whole and parts.
- Label amounts and quantities at the table with words and signing for younger children.
- Routinely have children set the table with you, talking about “how many,” one-to-one correspondence, and what goes with what.
- Offer non-meal times for exploration of pouring, scooping, and using ladles for judging amounts (sand and water play).
- Offer different shapes of food at the table and label them.
- Use “today,” “tomorrow,” for menus.
- Engage children to solve problems of how much food is needed for all children at the table to have some of a particular food.
- Use daily sheets for recording children’s food and drink input and their new eating skills.
- Make graphs of children’s food preferences; post them!

OTHERS:
Make your list:
Connecting School and Home

- Post menus by the children’s cubbies so parents can see them at arrival and departure. and send menus home for families to read together.
- Introduce new foods that the children try at school in family letters.
- Invite parents to eat with the children at the center.
- Include news of the topics of children’s table talk in newsletters.
- Talk with the children about recipes that are used for meals at the center; send the recipes home.
- Ask parents for family recipes.
- Offer Saturday breakfast for parent-child time and let the children share with their parents how they have meals at school. Then, have a short parent training on how children learn math and literacy at mealtimes, just as well as they learn in other parts of the day.
- Offer handouts for parents about nutrition and children’s growth and development.

OTHERS:
Make your list:

Nutrition Education with Young Children

- Help children develop sensory awareness of food, including textures, tastes, smell, touch, sound (chewing and biting), and temperatures. Encourage sensory-related vocabulary such as sweet, salty, oily, warm, cold, tart, bitter, fragrant, crunchy, sticky, and slimy.
- Establish children’s understanding of the relationship between food and health.
- Set the environment so children have healthy emotional associations with food.
- Assist children to know and maintain internal cues of hunger, fullness, and enjoyment of food.
- Make opportunities for children to talk about eating and food to help them develop rich vocabularies.
- Intentionally model “food” vocabulary such as seeds, (ook in at a banana and find the seeds), crunchy, peeling, stem, corn kernels, broth, pea pods, leafy lettuce… the options are endless.

OTHERS:
Make your list: