Encourage Child to Child Conversation at Mealtimes

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

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 powerful 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 them 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 real questions for the children to answer and discuss. A real 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.