Teaching Young Children to Serve Themselves in Group Settings

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Some people call it “family style service.” Others call it “children serving themselves.” We like to call it “community style service.”

What ever you call it, it means that containers of food are put on the table. Then, children pass a common container around the table, each taking some for their plates.

Sometimes a whole meal is available for children to serve themselves. Sometimes, part of a meal is available for self-service. The children may pour their drinks, though other food is pre-served.

Centers and family care providers use a variety of routines around self-serving, depending on the age or skills of the children. For example, they may initially serve small helpings on toddler’s plates, but put out bowls of food for self-service on seconds. This thoughtful approach helps toddlers get through the first few bites without having to wait for others. Waiting is a task that toddlers are learning!

There are so many benefits to children when they serve their own plates. They learn to be social, caring, and self-directed diners in group settings. The risks exist. Establishing routines and patiently helping children build skills for serving self help minimize these risks.