RESPONSIVENESS, MEALTIMES, and HEALTHY EATING
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Children develop best when the environment is RESPONSIVE. Mealtimes in group settings are most successful for children when the people, the food, and the setting are responsive. Are you reading children’s cues!!!!

STRATEGIES

WHAT ARE THE ROLES OF ADULTS AT THE TABLE?
Children need adults to eat with them. This provides opportunities for modeling. Adults help teach children hygiene and social conventions. When a relaxed, responsive adult is near, children are more likely to feel relaxed and secure. Children need adults to keep them safe, including giving support to hygiene, watching for possible choking hazards, and helping children negotiate conflicts.

USE PARENTS AS VOLUNTEERS AT MEALTIMES
Hold a parent workshop on feeding children. Model best practices by having new volunteers sit with you at one of the children’s tables. Be sure to give them things to read about feeding, such as How to Get Your Kid to Eat, But Not Too Much by Ellyn Satter (Bull Publishers, San Francisco).

TALK, LISTEN, and WATCH
Observe language and be responsive to the child’s vocabulary and understanding of the meaning of words. Be aware of the words you use. The words you use casually may be new words to the children.

Learn children’s thoughts about food by analyzing the vocabulary they use. Note how they put foods into categories. Listen to what children say. Reply with an intentional response rather than a casual response. Reflect on the cue the child gave you, and then respond.

HOW MUCH???????
Teach children how to determine bite size. Talk with them about serving size and how much they pick up with their eating utensils. Make child size eating utensils available. Choose serving utensils that hold a small serving size. (An ice cream scoop works great for many foods!) Provide plates that are about the size of salad plates. Children need smaller servings than adults do. If you serve the children’s plates, ask them to tell you how much to put on the plate.
A WORD ABOUT GAGGING AND CHOKING
When children gag or choke because they have too much in their mouths, tell them to "spit it out!" This is not a time to teach about bite size. This is a time to keep the child safe. After the child recovers from the emotional trauma of choking, talk about bite size, chewing, and swallowing. Later, remind the child about “the time you choked.” Have a gentle conversation with them about how much food to put safely on the eating utensils, and then follow up with modeling and direction at the table.

Be strict about enforcing rules to prevent choking. Some common rules are: sit on your bottom while you eat; finish chewing and swallowing before you leave the table; stay out of other children’s space while they are eating, and do not talk while you are chewing.

“I WANT TO SIT BESIDE YOU WHEN WE EAT, OK?”
Mealtimes are social events. Use community style service where children serve themselves from bowls and pour their drinks from pitchers. Arrange the eating environment so children can serve themselves and share the process of getting food. Even two year old children can serve part of their meals. If self-serving the whole meal is impossible or impractical, make at least some things self-served. At the very least, give the children opportunities to say how much goes on their plates.

KNIFE, FORK, SPOON, or FINGERS!!
Give children knives, forks, and spoons and serving utensils, bowls, and pitchers. The opportunity to use these allows children to exercise muscles, develop skills that are socially valued, and be more efficient in eating. Remember that children’s muscles are under construction! Strength and endurance are not yet established. Choose a time to teach about how to hold and use utensils when children are relaxed and their muscles are not fatigued. Talking about how to use the utensils works best when children are not too hungry and not too tired. Small group times are good for talking about serving yourself and using utensils. Offer knives, forks, and spoons for a small group activity, when the children are not so hungry, and let them practice different ways of using utensils.

“MY HAND IS DIRTY!”
Make opportunities for children to learn rules about eating and hygiene that are appropriate for “mine,” “yours,” and “ours.” Teach about hygiene when children serve themselves. Help children to use “mine,” “yours,” and “ours,” as they learn how to avoid cross contamination. Washing hands and faces are necessary.

Teach children to thoroughly wash before and after eating. Teachers are models. As teachers and children wash, teachers can describe what children are doing. “You are using warm water and soap. You are washing between your fingers.”
A WORD ABOUT NAPKINS

Even very young children know when their faces are dirty and they know when their hands are messy. They feel it and they see it! Make napkins available. Help children use them when they let you know they feel dirty.

“WHAT IS THIS WHITE STUFF?” AND NUTRITION EDUCATION

Help children learn about food and how food helps them grow and have energy and good health. Have conversations about where foods come from and how certain foods give us more energy, and how other foods help us have strong bones. Talk about which ones help us run faster and which ones help us grow taller. (Be sure you know the difference in which foods affect energy and which affect growth.) If you do not know which foods do what, give general information. For example, say, “Food keeps us healthy,” or “Food helps us grow,” or “Food gives us energy.”

Be a model who tastes foods that are new to children. Your efforts at tasting, and then telling about the food, will give children courage to try the new food. Note that peers are effective models, as well. But be careful not to compare how or what children eat. Eating and coming to understand food is an individual issue.

Remember foods may be new to the children, though they are commonly known in your culture or environment. Give names to foods. Talk about how foods are similar to ones the children already know. Talk about the characteristics of food and help children make simple food categories. “These grapefruit pieces are tangy, just like the orange we had the other day.”

Integrate food activities throughout the day. Include food and food “talk” in dramatic play, stories and books. Introduce new foods in looking and tasting games, where children get to try foods without having to worry that the food is their meal. (Have napkins near in case children really dislike the taste.)

Teach about foods and categories in the food pyramid, but do not expect children to conceptualize the pyramid. Include the words “grains, vegetables and fruits, meats, and dairy products.” Typically, young children do not think in the abstract. Most do not understand the hierarchy of the food pyramid. They can, however, begin to put foods in categories.

Avoid using the terms “good food” and “bad food.” Talk instead about how our bodies need grains, fruits and vegetables. Be sure to help children assign names and discover similarities and differences as they learn about food.
CAUTIONS

AVOID FORCING CHILDREN TO EAT
Do not force children to eat. Monitor comments to children about amounts they eat. Subtle forcing is as hurtful as is obvious forcing. Have someone make notes of comments you make at the table with children. Analyze your comments to see what messages you send to children about eating. Be aware of phrases that hinder a child in developing self-regulation.

SERVING SIZE
If you must serve the children's plates, do not serve large portions. Be careful of size of second helpings. Though a child may ask for more, do not assume the child wants an extra big amount or even as much as was in the first serving. Give the child a choice of how much! Offer small size plates for young children.

ACTIVE MOVEMENT
Pay attention to healthy eating habits and active movement. Teach children about how our bodies need food to help us move. Then be sure you model moving with the children. Plan active movement activities and time for active play in your schedule. Plan very active outdoor play, everyday, if possible.

ADULT ROLE
Avoid standing, walking around the tables, or doing multiple tasks while the children eat. Arrange people, the serving bowls, and the children so that mealtime provides the pleasure of sitting down together in a relaxed fashion. Do not make lunch break time for staff. This is time for adults to respond and support children's attempts at successful eating. Be mindful of children's cues and respond with as much thought as you would use in other parts of the curriculum day. If you must take a break at mealtime, advocate that those who eat with the children follow good practices.