Setting a mealtime environment to promote competence and self-control in children is a goal of many early childhood programs. The things adults say to children have impact on their motivation to try new things and to become competent and self-controlled.

Intentional and thoughtfully planned teacher talk can be descriptively reinforcing for children as they learn.

**Assist self-regulation.** Help children think about what they are doing. Rather than saying, "I think you are such a good girl for helping out with snack," it is more effective to say, "It looks like you are finishing cutting the pizza. You cut up five pieces of pizza. You made something for everyone to eat."

**Be specific.** Describe the mealtime task the child is doing. Reinforce what children are accomplishing by specifically describing their action. "You are using the soap and hot water. You are scrubbing your hands. You cleaned the fronts and backs of your hands." This leads the child through the challenge and at the same time focuses her on what is working. Intentionally decide what skills you are hoping to reinforce. Then choose the actions you will descriptively reinforce.

**Avoid insincere or empty evaluative comments.** Too much empty discussion about a child's attempts and accomplishments results in feelings of emptiness. Adjectives such as "good" and "bad" give little information to a child about the tasks that they are working on acquiring. Be specific and descriptive in your comments.

**Avoid comparisons between children as you describe behaviors.** Make comparisons about the child's skills over time, rather than about the child's skills in relation to someone else's skills. "You are the best meat cutter in the school," is an inappropriate comparison because it sets an almost impossible standard for the child to meet. "You cut your meat without any help today," is descriptive and targeted to the child's skill.

**Give private feedback.** Children may be placed in groups for society's purposes, but learning is an individual effort. Look for the tasks that a child is working on, then, give him descriptive reinforcements as he attempts the tasks.

Think about building a child's sense of self-control, independence, competence, and confidence around eating and mealtimes in the group setting. Watch for successes. Help the child identify eating success through descriptive reinforcement, and watch the confidence rise. A logical sequence unfolds. A risk is taken and successfully achieved, competence is established, confidence follows, and another risk is ready to be taken.