



RESPONSIVENESS AT MEALTIMES

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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.

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 adult is near, children are more likely to feel relaxed and secure. Children need adults to keep them safe, including giving support to hygiene, possible choking hazards, and conflicts that children negotiate.

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 "thoughtful" response rather than "casual" response.

HOW MUCH???????

Teach children about 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!) Children need smaller servings than adults do. If you serve children's plates, make seconds and thirds smaller than initial amounts. 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

If children are gagging and choking 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. Remind the child about “the time you choked.” Remind the child to think about how much food to put safely on the eating utensils.

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.

“I WANT TO SIT BESIDE YOU WHEN WE EAT, OK?”

Mealtimes are great social events. Use family style service. Arrange the eating environment so children can serve themselves and share the process of getting food. 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. The opportunity to use all three 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. Provide child size serving utensils, pitchers, and bowls. 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.

“MY HAND IS DIRTY!”

Teach about what is YOURS, MINE, and OURS. Make opportunities for children to learn the rules about eating and hygiene that are appropriate for “yours”, “mine,” and “ours.” Teach about hygiene when children serve themselves. Help children determine what is “mine,” “yours,” and “ours,” and how to avoid cross contamination.

Teach children to thoroughly wash hands before and after eating. Teacher’s can model this! As children wash their hands, be sure to describe what they 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?”

Help children learn about food. Model tasting foods that are new to children. Remember the food may be new to the children, though it is commonly known in the environment. Give names to foods. Talk about how foods are similar. Talk about the characteristics of food and help children make food categories.

Integrate food activities throughout the day. Include food and food “talk” in dramatic play, stories and books. 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!

ADULT ROLE

Do not make lunch break time. This is time for adults to respond and support children’s attempts at successful eating. If you must take a break at mealtime, advocate that those who eat with the children follow good practices. Avoid standing, walking around the tables, or doing multiple tasks while the children eat. Arrange people, the serving bowls, and the children so that the pleasure of sitting down together is assured.