

TIP SHEET

Mealtime Accommodations



Mealtime is an essential component of the early childhood program. It is a special time in which children have the opportunity to learn specific independence skills (such as feeding and drinking), and to communicate and socialize. Planning the mealtime routine requires special considerations.

In the child care environment, it is important to create a routine that is safe, healthy, positive, and nurturing. Things to consider include: allergies, special diets/food restrictions, and offering food textures and portions that meet the child's nutritional needs and their ability to chew and swallow.

A positive and nurturing mealtime environment should include:

- planning the transition to the lunch table
- setting the rules and expectations for mealtime
- modeling behaviours for the children
- teaching self-help skills (self-feeding)
- practicing communication and social skills at the table
- programming activities to reinforce the acquisition of skills

The following are suggestions to help you plan the mealtime routine and to “set the stage” for a positive experience:

Planning the transition to the lunch table

- Have a short and quiet activity before lunch. This will help the children to relax, listen, and follow directions.
- Give warnings prior to the transition. If possible, use verbal and nonverbal reminders to ensure that every child understands your message. For example, you can say, “In five minutes we will tidy up for lunch”, while using gestures, pictures, or objects as visual reminders to accompany your words.
- Sing a song (or two) during the transition, as most children respond well to music. You can select a song together that will be used consistently for this transition.
- Divide the children into smaller groups, so it is easier for the children to handle the transition time. This also allows you to give more direct attention to children who may require more

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assistance. Remember that transitions can be stressful for some children, and inappropriate behaviours may arise at this time. Plan ahead.

Setting clear rules and expectations for mealtime

- Rules should be said and/or written in two to three-word sentences, especially when working with young children or children with developmental challenges. You may also want to use visual supports like a rules board and post it near the lunch area.
- Keep the rules to a minimum.
- Discuss the rules with the group ahead of time.

Modeling behaviours

- Sit at the table to have lunch with the children and model expectations and appropriate behaviours.
- Include peer role modeling as a teaching strategy to support children's development of skills.
- Consider peer role modeling when planning the seating arrangements for lunchtime. Children with different skill levels sit together. For example, children with more challenging behaviours could sit next to children with more developed skills in that area.

Teaching self-help skills

Independent feeding and drinking skills are learned at mealtimes. This learning will take time. Initially, you might need to assist the child with hand-over-hand support. Gradually, remove your assistance as you observe the child developing skills. You will move physical support from the hand to the wrist, to the elbow, to the shoulder of the child, until finally no support will be needed.

Consider the following suggestions to promote independence:

a) Seating arrangements

- Ensure that each child has her own space at the table.

- Use individualized place mats for the children to identify their own place. You can stick laminated pictures of each child, felt (or other textured material) to the mats, or use a specific color that each child can identify. Most children will benefit from these visual cues.
- Make seating arrangements that accommodate the needs of the children. Consider children who might need extra support, and have more developed peers sitting next to them.

b) Positioning

- The child should be able to sit still with her feet on a stable and firm surface. Ensure that the furniture (chair and table) are adequate for this.
- If necessary, use a step or a stool to provide support for the feet.
- Use a rubber place mat on the chair to prevent the child from sliding off.
- Make arrangements to accommodate children in wheelchairs. Ensure a clear path for the child to access the table and enough space at the table.

c) Recommendations/adaptations for utensils, plates and cups

- Always use child-sized plates and utensils.
- A child with fine motor difficulties will find it easier to grip if you enlarge the fork or spoon handle.
- Enlarge the handle by securing hair curlers or cylindrical foam pieces to it.
- A plate with a rim will help to keep the food on the plate while the child is learning to scoop.



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- Cups should also be child-sized.
- As the child transitions from drinking from a bottle to drinking from a cup, pour small amounts of liquid into the cup. This will prevent choking and minimize spilling.
- Also, teach the child to hold the cup with both hands, until she is ready to manage with just one hand.

Practicing communication and social skills

Mealtimes are excellent opportunities for the children to socialize and communicate with each other, and with you. You can promote social interaction and conversation at the table, and facilitate skill



development at this time. Also, many children find it exciting when they become helpers, so you may want to consider having them participate in setting the lunch table, serving the food, and cleaning up when lunch is finished. You can organize small groups to assist you on different days of the week. In this way, not only is independence promoted, but also a sense of responsibility, self-worth, and self-esteem.

Programming activities to reinforce the acquisition of skills

Throughout the day, create opportunities for the children to rehearse their skills. You can try activities such as cooking (preparing a simple meal or a snack), setting up a restaurant in the dramatic centre, playing games (healthy foods bingo), and reading stories about mealtimes.

Developing independent feeding and drinking, and learning good manners at the lunch table may be a challenge for young children. Consider the children's strengths and needs in this area and plan accordingly. The mealtime routine is meant to be a pleasant experience for you and the children. The time you invest in planning ahead for this routine will let you relax and enjoy the results.

References:

Cook, R.; Tessier, A.; Klein, D. (2000) *Adapting Early Childhood Curricula In Inclusive Settings*. Fifth Ed., Prentice Hall Inc.

For more information:

- Create your own visuals like Daily schedules, Classroom Labels, and First/Then boards to help make mealtimes a success by visiting the [VISUALS ENGINE](#).
- Visit our [Toy Shop 2](#) for tips on making your own adapted utensils.
- Take a look at our [Context Story about Abdi and Lunch Time](#).