

Family-Style Eating

What is “family-style” eating? To whose family does this refer? The phrase could be interpreted in many ways, depending on family and cultural traditions. Many childcare providers believe it is difficult to serve family-style, especially if their program is part of a local school system that serves “cafeteria-style,” or if they purchase food service from an outside vendor that provides food in prepackaged portions. However, family-style is much more than just the serving of food. Mealtime in childcare is active learning time and offers opportunities for discovery, trial and error, and child-initiated behavior.

Head Start defines family-style as adults and children eating together, sharing the same menu, and talking together in an informal way. Family-style dining also means that children are allowed to eat their meals and snacks in a manner that promotes the type of beneficial activities they might experience in their home environment, including activities that promote decision making, self-help skills, and sharing and social skills through interaction with others. Here are some ways to incorporate family-style meals and snacks, and the benefits this approach provides to children.

Explore “family-style” with the children

During circle time, ask children to talk about how their family eats at home. Remember that it is important to promote acceptance of the many different family styles. This is one way to explore cultural diversity and children’s respect for self and others. Topics might include:

- * Foods to choose from—foods may range from pasta to pot roast, cereal to pancakes, and pita to biscuits.
- * Who prepares the food—when discussing family roles, it is important to note that preparing food, like other activities, may be done by men, women, and/or children.
- * Where they eat and whom they eat with—families may sit together at a table to eat, or may eat together on the floor in front of the television. Some families eat at different times, or may prefer to eat in separate rooms

Teach through hand washing

All children and adults should wash their hands with soap and running water before eating or handling food. Make hand washing fun by singing songs or saying rhymes.

Help children serve their own plates.

This helps children develop self-help and motor skills, as well as decision-making skills as they choose how much of each food to put on their plate. Always consider safety and sanitation first! Do not allow children to serve finger foods or foods that are very warm. Prevent spills by placing serving bowls on non-slip rubber matting. Be aware of each child's developmental skills and provide easy-grip tongs for breads or crackers. Have serving utensils that are easy to handle for fruits and vegetables. Children can serve their own milk from a small pitcher or carafe into their plastic glass or if milk is provided in cartons, they can serve from a tray or cart. Be familiar with your local health department regulations, and discuss your program's policy on second servings with a qualified nutritionist and your management team.

Promote appropriate table manners

If your state and local licensing standards allow this, children can pass bowls of prepackaged crackers or bread, napkins, ketchup or mustard bottles, or other lightweight items. Encourage words like "please" and "thank you". Help children learn to use utensils such as forks, spoons, and table knives (not sharp) rather than only serving "finger foods." To the extent possible, use entire place settings to teach children the use of all utensils. If milk is served in cartons, straws or plastic glasses also should be provided. This prepares children for restaurant dining.

Encourage tasting and decision making

All children and adults should eat from the same menu unless they are on a restricted diet (e.g., for food allergies, diabetes, etc.). The childcare program should provide well-balanced foods that are high in nutrients and low in sugar, salt, and fat. Therefore, menus should be readily adaptable for any child or staff member on a special diet.

All foods should be served at the same time so children can eat different foods in the order they prefer. Encourage children to taste all their foods, but do not force them to taste or eat specific foods. When promoting new foods, the goal is to get the food on the taste buds 18 times! It can take many “tastes” before a child really decides if he or she likes or dislikes a food. When children do not want to try a food, encourage them to put a small amount on the plate to taste. Caregivers should work with a qualified dietician to assure that each child’s nutritional needs are met.

Activities to Promote Family-Style Eating

- Place interesting plates, cups, place mats, cloth or paper napkins, and eating utensils in the learning center. Allow children to “set the table” the way they want to.
- Allow children to take turns setting the table for snacks and meals.
- Let children make choices when you set the table (e.g., “Do you want the red cup or the blue cup?”).
- At each meal or snack time, allow one or two children to help with clean up. Children can clean the table using mild detergent (not bleach or chemicals) before and after meals. This is not the “real cleaning,” but rather an educational activity.
- On a regular basis (e.g., weekly) set the table in a special way. One table setting might represent a formal “restaurant” with knife, salad fork, dinner fork, and spoon and folded napkins. Another setting might be a picnic, with a large washable cloth spread on the floor, with paper plates and finger foods.
- Play music occasionally at mealtime. Keep the volume low so it does not interfere with conversation.
- When introducing or serving foods from various cultures, use an interesting cultural tablecloth, such as a Caribbean batik, African fabric, or Mexican serape. You also may choose to play music that represents that culture.

At first, family-style meal service entails a bit more work for the caregiver, going “hand over hand” as each child serves her/himself. However, after the first

month, mealtime is a breeze for the caregiver. Children adapt very quickly and soon experience the opportunities and benefits that family-style food service provides.

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