

A Staff Training Aid

Family Style Dining

A Publication of the Environments Professional Group

Family style dining in a child care setting enriches curriculum as no other activity can. Pouring, passing, serving, and sharing food not only promote language and fine motor development, but also enhance a child's self-concept by providing opportunities to make decisions and to take responsibility.

The Value of Family Style Dining

Positive social interaction with peers and adults develops naturally around mealtime when children are encouraged to fully participate in the process. There's nothing more exciting for children than to be able to say **"I did it all by myself!"**

Something as simple as pouring a glass of milk can be deeply satisfying for young children. A warm, easy, give-and-take conversation style should be initiated by caregivers following children's leads.

Interaction should be equal and involve a lot of descriptive statements.

This type of relaxed dialogue goes a long way toward allowing self-help and social skills to grow.

However, the right equipment is really important! Young diners should have appropriately sized tables and chairs so that children can sit comfortably with their feet on the floor, yet have room to move freely. It is also important that children eating together be at the same eye level with each other. Small groups of 5-7 are conducive to conversation and interaction.

Marcus helps himself to a serving of bread. Family Style Dining can be found on pages 162-167 of the Pre3child® Catalog and on pages 80-85 of the Early Childhood Catalog.



Nurturing & Nourishing

Providing Safe and Secure Feeding-Time Experiences for Infants

Mealtimes at any age are social times. One-on-one personal interaction between a caregiver and an infant at feeding time is as valuable to nurturing the emotional development of a baby as the food is to nourishing physical growth. Having physical needs met in a caring, timely manner establishes a secure connection between the infant and his world. This connection continues throughout life. Feeding times that feel safe and relaxed and that follow individual schedules help infants to develop healthy attitudes toward food and also reinforce trusting relationships with adults.

- Infants are more at ease at mealtimes when they are with someone who is familiar with their eating schedules and who knows how to respond to their cues. Assigning each infant his own caregiver for feeding time helps to make this a comfortable experience. Infants too young to sit on their own must always be held while eating. They should never be given propped-up bottles.
- Infants who can sit on their own may sit in high or low chairs at mealtime. To continue the opportunity for pleasant interaction, each should still be fed individually and given special attention by his primary caregiver.
- Infants often have individual needs and special food requirements. Frequently, centers require that parents fulfill these needs. Food brought from home should be clearly labeled and in single-serving containers. Formula should be in original containers. All feeding information should be posted, and uneaten food should be thrown away after 24 hours.
- It is best to have refrigeration in the room to make it easy to honor individual feeding times.
- Bottles may be warmed in hot tap water but should not be left for more than 5 minutes. Be sure to check the temperature before feeding the infant.
- For safe and sanitary meals, baby food should be removed from jars and served by caregivers in sturdy, dishwasher-safe bowls using smooth-edged, appropriately sized spoons.
- Provide sips from cups as young children are ready – usually by the half year mark.
- Provide no-spill cups as soon as children are ready. Most children can be weaned from bottles by the end of the first year.
- Never give bottles to children in cribs, and never allow children to walk around with bottles. This negatively impacts good eating habits and is also bad for teeth.
- Offering older infants finger foods, spill-proof plastic cups, and suitably sized and shaped eating utensils encourages development of fine motor skills, independence, and positive self-concepts.

From “Oops” to “A-Ha!”

Creating Positive Family Style Dining Experiences for Toddlers

The most important aspect of Family Style Dining for toddlers is the social interaction that takes place during mealtimes. Youngest children are testing new skills, and how well they’re doing is reflected back to them through their interactions with other toddlers and their caregivers. That’s why it’s so important for caregivers to fully participate in the toddler dining experience and eat with the children. By modeling the use of the utensils and by verbalizing what is taking place – naming things, pointing out actions, asking questions – caregivers create a nurturing, relaxing, supportive atmosphere where toddlers can fully participate and succeed!

- Make mealtimes pleasant and relaxing. Set an attractive table and play soft music in the background.
- Energetic toddlers need small servings of food throughout the day. Provide nutritious meals and snacks to reinforce healthful eating habits. Have foods that are familiar to the children, keeping in mind the cultural mix in the classroom. Introduce new foods gradually. Serve small servings to avoid overwhelming toddlers, but make seconds available if they are wanted.
- Include families and invite them occasionally for mealtimes. Ask them to share their mealtime traditions and food preferences.
- Use mealtimes as learning times to practice conversation and social skills, to talk



about nutrition, and to reinforce basic concept skills (colors of the foods, shapes of plates and napkins, etc.)

- Toddlers are focused on gaining independence, so expect lots of control issues over food. Often choosing what they would like to eat is a way of asserting themselves over something they can control. Try not to turn this new independence into a power struggle, and help toddlers begin forging good eating habits for life. Do not force toddlers to eat all of the food offered or to eat specific things. Understand that at times they will appear not to have eaten at all. That's OK. It's their choice.
- Toddlers are not readily able to discern personal space or respect others' property. This is the "Mine!" stage. For more peaceful mealtimes, toddlers need to be well-spaced. The use of place mats gives visual cues to individual space.
- Toddlers should be served at the table in small groups. Even the youngest can help hold a serving spoon or take a piece of bread from a platter.
- "Let me do it!" opportunities are created when toddlers are allowed to help in mealtime preparations and simple "cooking" – pouring milk on cereal, spreading butter on bread, mixing chopped fruits of choice for a fruit salad. Tiny pitchers and appropriate child-size utensils facilitate these experiences with a minimum of mess.
- Older toddlers can use an appropriate knife to practice cutting and spreading. This enhances the development of fine motor skills and encourages independence.
- It is important for caregivers to have patience with the messes and food explorations of toddlers while gently guiding and encouraging them to feed themselves.

Creating Supportive Mealtime Environments

Enriching Dining Experiences for Preschoolers, Kindergartners, and Primary Age Children

The "realness" of Family Style Dining is what appeals most to children 3 years and older. Setting a fancy table, helping themselves to food, and cleaning up afterward are all familiar home activities. Despite their growing independence, these older children also need patient and nurturing caregiver participation as a point of reference for their emerging skills. The caregiver has many opportunities to enhance learning during mealtimes by modeling the use of the utensils, by exhibiting good table manners, by pointing out and naming things, and by asking questions about taste, smell, color, etc.

- Children should be given the opportunity to make choices, and they should have some control over what is placed onto their plates.
- Smaller plates and serving utensils allow children to serve themselves appropriate amounts. Young children shouldn't be overwhelmed by the amount of food on their plates. Serving at the table makes it easy for heartier eaters to get seconds!
- A variety of sizes of pitchers lets children at different stages have control over pouring their own drinks.

- Using “bussing trays” with adequate depths promotes successful clean-up experiences and lets children have a sense of autonomy and responsibility for the entire experience.

Things to Remember as You Interact with Children at Mealtime:

- **Promoting independence and self-help skills involves spills!** There’s just no way around this one. Caregivers must be willing to deal with messy situations and even to watch them happen. “*Hey, that’s okay. Spills happen...*” These should be familiar words to toddlers and preschool children at mealtime. Begin mealtime with paper towels close at hand. Don’t wait until a spill occurs to go dashing for tools to clean it up. Support and encourage children in their own efforts to clean up after themselves and others.
- **Using see-through pitchers and glasses at mealtime helps children develop logic and math skills.** Spatial awareness comes with a visual picture of how much they’ve poured, and see-through pitchers and glasses allow children to discriminate between less and more.
- **Just as adults need to enjoy the books they are reading to children, they also need to enjoy the meals they share with children.** Relaxing and enjoying mealtime is often a challenge to caregivers who may continually be feeling the bustle of a classroom, but it is vitally important to do so. Organization can help. Have dishes, food, supplies, etc. close by. Children also like to participate in preparation, serving, and clean-up. Mealtime should never be rushed. Have a quiet activity available for early finishers who wish to leave the table.
- Sitting with children and sharing the same food at a cheerful and colorful table lets children know that food is to be enjoyed. **Bring flowers to the table once in a while!** Add a table cloth or place mats. How about a little soft dinner music? Encourage children to come up with creative ways to liven up table setting routines. Make mealtime central to your curriculum!
- Fresh, sparkling clean dishes and flatware invite both children and adults to feel good about mealtime. **A table set with care and beauty definitely promotes good nutrition.** The child who enjoys mealtime is often more willing to try new foods and is much more likely to develop healthful eating habits.
- Remember that mealtime is not something separate from your daily curriculum. The same skills children develop during free play and group time are utilized and practiced during mealtime. **Sharing food at a cheerful table promotes child development as surely as does any other segment of the day.**

Recommended Equipment & Materials for Family Style Dining

Environments provides Family Style Dining equipment which meets the requirements of major Accreditation Agencies and Associations.

- appropriately sized tables and chairs so children can sit comfortably with their feet on the floor
- well-designed, age-appropriate spoons, cups, and bowls which invite infants to feed themselves
- child-size dishes, serving pieces, pitchers, and glasses that encourage young children to serve themselves child-size portions
- appropriately sized, easy-to-grasp stainless steel flatware which lets children experience all eating utensils – including round-tipped knives
- serving trays and bussing trays that allow young children to participate successfully in mealtime set-up and clean-up

For Family Style Dining equipment, see Pre3child® Catalog pages 162-167, Early Childhood Catalog pages 80-85, or go to Environments Stores at www.environments.com.

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The Environments Professional Group is a team of educators and designers who come together to make the connection between the needs of early childhood programs and the developmentally appropriate products that meet these needs.

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These suggestions and guidelines are general in nature and are not intended to take the place of any specific instructions provided to you by your supervisors or regulatory agencies. In addition, appropriate caution, reasonable safety precautions, and adult supervision of children are recommended at all times. Do not leave children unattended at any time.

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