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FAMILY STYLE MEALS

Children establish eating habits as early as age 2! So it is important Head Start programs partner with families to build healthy eating habits early. One way to do this is to serve meals family-style. Family-style meals is a great way to introduce healthy foods, model healthy behaviors, and provide opportunities for nutrition education.

Serving family-style meals means serving foods in dishes and eating together at the table. It is also an opportunity for children to have meaningful conversations with adults and develop social relationships. Head Start standards require all toddlers and preschool-age children and assigned classroom staff, including volunteers, eat together family-style and share the same menu to the extent possible. Children are encouraged to serve themselves or to serve themselves **with an adult's help.**

This newsletter discusses the importance of serving family-style meals in Head Start programs, how to serve family-style meals, and how to engage parents to serve family-style meals at home.

Following are some reasons it is important to serve family-style meals in Head Start programs. Serving family-style meals:

- Introduces healthy foods to children and encourages them to try new ones
- Provides opportunities for nutrition education such as teaching serving sizes or talking about healthy foods and food groups
- Allows children to see adults model healthy eating
- Teaches food safety by encouraging hand washing and the use of serving utensils
- Builds independence by allowing children to make decisions and take responsibility
- Develops fine and gross motor skills by asking children to pour, pass, serve, and share food
- Enhances language and social skills when children practice table manners and learn appropriate meal time behavior
- Decreases food waste as children learn to take the amount of food they want
- Improves meal time behavior
- Reinforces basic concept skills from the classroom such as naming shapes, colors, flavors, and textures



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HOW TO SERVE MEALS FAMILY STYLE IN HEAD START

Serving family-style meals is more than having food on the table for children to serve themselves. To make the mealtime environment pleasant and positive, Head Start staff can:

- **Involve children:** Ask children to help wash foods or set the table; bring food to the table; pour, pass, and serve food; and clean up after a meal. Some children may not be ready for some of these tasks or may need help. Start with easier tasks such as **setting the table or passing bowls**. **Support children's skill development** by adding new and more challenging tasks when children are ready. Having more than one adult at a table with younger children or with children with special health care needs can help make sure all children get a chance to participate.
- **Model good mealtime behaviors:** Sit at the table with children and eat the same foods. Modeling also includes demonstrating food safety (washing hands before meals), good table manners, using utensils, and trying new foods.
- **Allow children to choose whether to eat, what to eat, and how much to eat.** To establish healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime, children need to feel in control of their eating. Provide healthy foods and encourage children to try new ones. Let children decide whether to eat, what to eat, and how much to eat.
- **Use the right equipment:** Use child size serving bowls, plates, and utensils. Tables and chairs should be the right size for children to sit comfortably with their feet on the floor. It is important children eating together be at the same eye level with each other.
- **Make mealtime interesting.** Use mealtimes as teaching opportunities by serving foods with a variety of shapes, colors, smells, tastes, and textures. **Engage children by using pictures of foods or asking questions about foods'** shape, color, smell, taste, or texture to build language skills.

SUPPORTING STAFF

Mealtime is an ideal opportunity to encourage healthy choices and provide nutrition education. The same skills children develop during free play and group time are utilized and practiced during mealtime. It is an opportunity to practice social skills, encourage healthy habits, and reinforce basic concept skills such as colors, shapes, grouping, etc. Health managers can support staff by participating in mealtime as well as providing training and strategies to make mealtime more successful.

Possible strategies can include:

Practicing: Have children practice meal routines with pretend food during play time. **Don't forget to encourage sharing and table manners.**

Building transitions: Teachers can plan a quiet activity before and after mealtime to help set the mood for a relaxed and manageable experience. Play soft music, stretch, sing a song.

Preparing for spills: Teachers can make mealtime less stressful by preparing for spills and support children in their own efforts to clean up after themselves. Teachers can serve food in multiple small serving containers instead of one large container to minimize waste and spills. Keep extra serving utensils handy.

Asking for help: Staff can join mealtime and help with challenging mealtime behavior or when introducing new routines. Health managers can demonstrate proper techniques and potential nutrition education opportunities.



FAMILY STYLE MEALS IN EARLY HEAD START

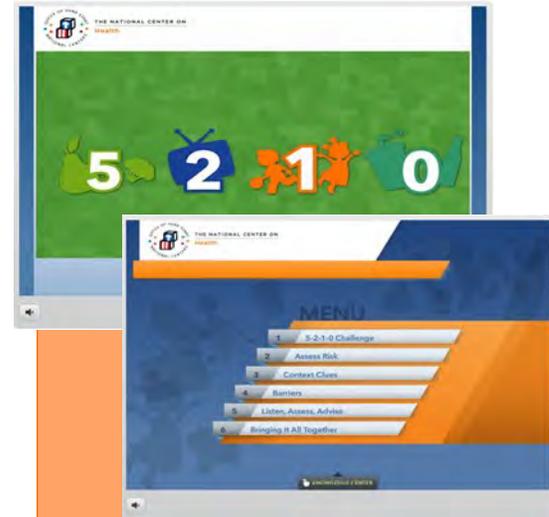
Many Early Head Start programs struggle to understand how to implement family-style meals with infants and toddlers. Health managers can support teachers to integrate family-style meal components gradually and aligned to the developing skills of the individual child. Remember, infants younger than 6 months should be fed on demand and given only formula or breast milk. Infants should be held while being fed and never be given a propped bottle or bottles while in the crib. Once an infant is ready for introducing solid foods, babies should be encouraged to take part in their meal.

Family-style meals in Early Head Start should include:

- **Individual interaction** between a caregiver and an infant such as talking, singing or just making eye contact. This is as valuable to nurturing the emotional development of a baby as the food is to nourishing the physical growth.
- **Positive eating environment** that is safe and relaxed. Establishing feeding routines can greatly reduce distractions and staff stress.
- **Gradual introduction of new foods** according to parent-approved food plans. Remember, offer only one new food at a time and allow 3-5 days before introducing another. Make sure staff are aware of the signs and symptoms of [food allergies](#).
- **Nurtured independence** that includes allowing infants to feed themselves, touch and explore their food and hold their own cup as they grow and develop.
- **Patience!** Toddlers need lots of practice to learn to finger feed, use a spoon, and drink from a cup. Try to balance learning new skills with enjoying eating. As toddlers learn mealtime skills, build small, easy tasks into the meal structure such as pouring milk from a carton into a cup, helping to clean spills, setting the table, etc. Remember infants and toddlers are new at this and will inevitably make messes.

Don't forget to be aware of possible choking hazards!

New! Strategies to Support and Encourage Healthy Active Living Online Course



This online, interactive self-study course for Head Start and Early Head Start staff focuses on healthy active living. Learners will practice building skills to effectively communicate and engage with families around creating and maintaining a healthy, active lifestyle. The course provides 6 separate learning modules, a knowledge center for further resources, a staff wellness assessment, and an interactive pdf of the 5,2,1,0 framework. You can find this resource on the National Center on Health [Healthy Active Living](#) page.





ENGAGING FAMILIES

Families have the greatest impact on their child's eating habits. Head Start staff can support families to build healthy habits. One way to do this is by practicing family-style meals during program events like family nights or socializations.

Here are some strategies Head Start staff can share with families to make family-style meals successful at home:

- **Let children help prepare food and do other things to get the meal ready.** Children can wash fruits or vegetables or mix or stir ingredients. Younger children can help set the table. Start with easy tasks and build up to more challenging ones. Be patient! It takes time for children to learn new skills.
- **Talk at the table.** Ask children question about things they are interested in and about the shape, color, smell, or taste of the foods they are eating. If there is more than one adult at the table, have adults talk to each other, too. Keep conversation topics positive. Praise children for the things they are doing well, and support the skills they are still developing.
- **Encourage children to try new foods by serving them along with familiar foods.** Offer a new food to children many times. It may take 10 to 15 times before a child will accept a new food.
- **Model eating healthy foods.** Children copy what other adults do. They are more likely to eat and try new foods if they see their parents or other caregivers enjoying the foods.
- **Allow children to pick new foods to try.** For example, look for new fruits or vegetables at the grocery store and let the child choose one to try. See the [January 2015](#) issue of the *Health Services Newsletter* for strategies on selecting fruits and vegetables from farmers markets, farms, grocery stores, and specialty stores.

Food for thought! It is important to remind parents that children learn how much food to choose by listening to their own hunger cues. Staff can suggest that families provide healthy foods but allow the child to choose whether to eat and how much to eat. They should encourage small servings and allow their child to come back for more.

**Coming Soon!
Healthy Eating
e-learning games**

Head Start staff can use these fun learning games to support healthy eating with families.



Learners will practice:

- Choosing healthy beverages and snacks for young children
- Modeling healthy eating
- Building healthy meals in a Head Start setting
- Choosing appropriate portion sizes for infants, toddlers, and young children
- Identifying sugar content of common beverages



RESOURCES

Resources on ECKLC

[ABC's of Successful Menu Planning: Family Style Meal](#)

[Physically Healthy and Ready to Learn National Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Resource Center Technical Assistance Paper No. 1](#)

Other Resources

[National Food Service Management Institute.](#)

[The Basic Guide to Family Style Dining- Part 1](#)

[Planning and Preparing: Family Style Dining- Part 2](#)

[Happy Meal Times with Family Style Meals](#)

Table Project. [Family Style Dining.](#)

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. 2004. [Building Blocks for Fun and Healthy Meals: A Menu Planner for Child and Adult Food Program.](#)

Fostering a culture of health and wellness for Head Start children, families, and staff.

NATIONAL CENTER ON HEALTH

Our Goal:

To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

CONTACT US!

The National Center on Health welcomes your feedback on this newsletter issue as well as your suggestions for topics for future issues. Please forward your comments to nchinfo@aap.org or call (888) 227-5125.

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School readiness begins with health!

