

Positive Food and Eating Environments

Anne Hemmer: Here's some strategies you can try to help make mealtime a positive experience. We want to offer children each item, not force children to eat. Help children build their serving skills. Allow second helpings when all have been served, and use encouraging language during our meal service.

This is a busy slide, but I developed it purposely for that reason. It's important to remember when thinking about meals that the food and the environment are equally important. You can utilize this information to help staff and families understand that mealtime for children is not just an eating event. It's a learning opportunity to help children understand about food and eating, something they will do every day, and continue after they leave us. Begin to help a child establish a lifelong healthy relationship with food and eating.

When we look at the meal environment side of the slide, on the left-hand side, we want to make sure that children receive food that's appropriate to their developmental readiness, that we are feeding infants and children – as Nicole spoke about – on demand. Food is encouraged but not forced. Enough time is allowed for children to eat at breakfast, at snack, and at lunchtime, and that caregivers and children eat together. That's how we want to try to start to establish a positive meal environment. Of course, we have to remember that food is involved in this mealtime. We want to make sure that a variety of food is served to broaden the child's experience.

In Head Start, we accommodate families with different religious backgrounds, and we serve food which is considered cultural and ethnic –which considers cultural and ethnic preferences. As we've talked about, the food should be high in nutrients, low in fat, sugar, and salt and not to use food as punishment or reward. Next, please, Nicole.

Let's think about how we teach children about food. The food that they're going to see during the meal, they're going to taste, they're going to touch, they're going to smell. The food that they're going to experience with their senses. How do we work with them with this?

We can think of mealtime as an opportunity to educate children, enhance their school readiness skills. Talking about the characteristics of food can help develop language. Teaching children going to pour and serve themselves can enhance motor development. Let's look at the menus and see how that can be used as a teaching opportunity. We can use the menus to discuss food during the mealtime and continue these discussions during scheduled activities and routines throughout the day. We can use mealtime as a learning experience by involving children in conversations about the specific characteristics of the foods they are eating.

The peas, what color are the peas? What shape are the peas? How did the peas grow? Where do they grow? And maybe including in the circle time prior to the meal a book about how foods are grown and how peas grow. We also want to think about planning mealtimes for success.

We do this with other things. We want children to be successful. We want our adults to be successful. How do we plan mealtimes for success?

Think about planned seating. Seating that helps healthy role modeling and peer learning. If you think about planned seating, you want to allow individualization for a child success by seating maybe that hesitant child next to an encouraging adult or an encouraging peer. We want to use effective strategies to encourage children to try new foods. We're going to talk about that a little bit later about introducing and trying new foods. Family-style meal service, another way to promote successful mealtimes. I think in Head Start, we know about family meal style. We want to let children serve themselves as appropriate.

That's a teaching opportunity to teach children how to serve themselves. This is something we want to initiate gradually so staff and children can learn about this together. We want to have serving dishes on the table and teach children to serve themselves and to understand what a portion size is. With family meal service, adults can model and develop key concepts for children's learning, including opportunities to try new foods and politely decline, understanding appropriate use of utensils, and assist with setting and cleaning the table after the meal. Other benefits include improved motor skills, self-confidence, and expanded social skills.

To keep thinking about how children can learn around food and around mealtimes, we want to help children learn about their feelings of hunger and fullness. We want to support the children's satiety clues. An opportunity to educate children about the concepts of eating, food, and nutrition. Children can learn about how it feels to be hungry and full. Adults can teach children about the physical feeling they can recognize when they are hungry and when they are full. Try asking children the questions on the right-hand side of the slide. Read books about nutrition. Do physical activity and using music that has nutrition themes.

We want to discuss with children, how do you feel when you're hungry and ready to eat? What does it feel like when you are full? thinking about if we often said, eat more of that, maybe say, are you full? If we at times would say, "Can you eat one more bite?" Maybe instead say, "Have you had enough to eat at this point, at this meal right now?" If we say, "Eat your vegetables before you can have your dessert." Maybe instead, "What does your tummy feel like? Does it have enough food? Would you like some more?"

Again, asking the questions and teaching about what it feels like, what your body feels like when it's hungry, and what your body feels like when it's full. I think is such an exciting lesson for children, and there are so many good resources and books around how to work with children around feelings of fullness and hunger.

A concept that helps with self-regulation — and that's what we were talking about before with the self-regulation of having children understand whether they are hungry or full — a concept that promotes this is the division of responsibility of feeding in children. The division of responsibility promotes the idea that support in an appropriate eating environment, children can naturally decide what they eat and self-regulate around the food.

Process that staff and families can learn and carry out gradually with children from the youngest age. If this is a concept or this is a practice that you're not using at this point, there's a lot of great resources in the handout around this, and this is something that is going to take time and practice to learn this process. It reinforces adults to listen to and educate so children learn about their feelings of hunger and fullness. This concept was developed by Ellyn Satter, who is a registered dietitian and a social worker. I just want to read a quote because she kind of took it all – the concept is outlined well in this quote, so I just want to read this quote from one of her books.

"Children want to eat and they want to grow up and eat the foods adults eat. Beyond doing the adult part of a structured sit-down family-style meals and snacks, adults don't have to do anything to get it to happen. Just be there and enjoy your own food. Keep in mind that grown-up food is all new to children, and they have a lot to learn. With them, it is like any other skill, such as reading or bike riding. They learn it bit by bit at their own pace because they want to. They will eat like a child – some days a lot, other days, not so much. Only one or two foods, not everything at a meal perhaps. What they eat one day, they may ignore the other. Try not to pressure children to eat certain amounts of or types of food."

I understand. I've been in the field for a long time. This is a tall order. The division of responsibility is that adults determine the what kind of foods are being served. The when ...Your scheduling and your timing of meals and snacks. And with appropriate utensils, at appropriate tables and chairs. That's the adult's responsibility. Then the child is responsible for determining how much and whether to eat. This division of responsibility is a concept that, if you're not doing now, will take time and practice. There's a resource link on this slide. There's a lot of information. There are videos about feeding children on the website, and this is all resources also on your resource list.

This may be a new concept to staff and families, so we may need to learn how to do this and gradually adopt these concepts and practices. This isn't something that you're just going to be able to turn around and do in a day or a week. Children – we want to have food and the concepts around food being a learning experience. Some strategies to introduce new foods are tasting parties, nutrition-themed books, nutrition-themed music, visiting farmers markets, growing foods in gardens, food preparation activities, and family activities of trying new foods, sending home resources to families about trying new foods.

I just want to say one thing about tasting parties. We used to do those a long time ago. I think they're a great way to introduce new foods. With tasting parties and preschool children, there doesn't have to be a lot of food, so you don't have to worry about the waste. For example, if you're going to taste apples, if you have a classroom of 18, 19, 20 children, two to three apples are plenty to use for a tasting party. Get a yellow apple, get a red apple, cut them into very, very thin slices in small pieces. Read a book about apples, how they grow. Talk about what they look like, what they smell like. Very small pieces, and then allow children to taste or not to taste.

I know it's hard and especially with the way food is now in the shortages. We don't want to waste food. Tasting parties only require a very small amount of the food you're introducing or tasting. Here's some resources to promote gardening in early education environments and the benefits it is to children. I want to read this because I think this is so important, and this is a research-based quote. "The more engaged children become with hands-on food education, such as gardening and food preparation, the more likely they will prefer and routinely consume the fruits and vegetables."

The first link on this slide is about cooking, growing, cooking fruits and vegetables in child care centers. There's also some other resources there in your resource handout. I know a lot of you do this. A lot of you have gardens. A lot of you have outdoor gardens, indoor gardens, and grow food. I think the research that showing that when children not only grow the food but tend to the gardens and prepare the food, they prefer and routinely eat that food is a really important concept to remember.

To summarize how some strategies and how we can carry out some of these concepts that may be new to you and may certainly take some time and some practice to get underway in your programs are to go back to our own wellness. So important at this time to consider our own wellness around healthy eating to create that positive food environment, that positive mealtime, positive eating environment.

Role modeling healthy behaviors and healthy eating. We know when we've sat with any children, they watch what we do as adults. They want to model what we do. If we can model healthy practice, that's so important for children. Support children's feelings of hunger and satiety. Have a lesson about "how do you feel." "Do you feel hungry? Do you feel full?" Read books about it. Do activities about it. Children have self-regulation, and we don't want to disrupt their self-regulation, so we want to support their feelings of hunger and fullness.

Integrate food nutrition concepts into daily routines. Every day, all the time. Nutrition isn't once a month. Nutrition isn't the flavor of the month. Nutrition isn't the idea of the week. Nutrition and food concepts using music, using physical activity routines with nutrition themes, all ways to integrate and to support healthy, positive mealtime and eating practices. Look up if you're not familiar with and you haven't started to use the division of responsibility. It's a concept that if you can integrate it into your programs - will leave children with a healthy and positive relationship with food. Educate children about healthy eating practices. We've talked a lot about that.

Make sure to follow up with your families. Everything you're doing with food, you know children are going to go home and talk about what they're doing, so follow up with families. Not just about the menu items, but also about the activities, about the books you're using, about the music you're using, and how you're integrating nutrition into your practices on a regular routine basis.