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Food for Thought: Mealtimes Can Be Educational and Enjoyable, Too

by Karen Stephens

Growing, gathering, and hunting food together. Preparing it, displaying it, and sharing it with others. For humans, it's an ancient bonding ritual.

Over time, the ritual has evolved and been refined. It varies creatively according to specific family, culture, climate, and country. But the common thread of the ritual remains providing food for survival.

Eating together is the process by which we nourish future generations — physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually. What, when, and how we prepare and offer food is interwoven with how we court and wed, how we rear children, how we celebrate, worship, honor, and even mourn.

In no small way, dressing tables to "break bread" together keeps the wheels of civilization in motion, it's socialization at its most pure and simple. Sharing meals shows concern and respect for others. Relationships are formed, and daily reaffirmed. A sense of belonging, an ethic of consideration and generosity, a dedication to community is passed from adult to child, then enjoyed peer to peer.

Child care programs — serving breakfast, two snacks, lunch, and sometimes an evening meal — provide children with up to 75% of their daily nutrition. The part we play in providing sustenance is dovetailed with promoting social and cultural attachments. Feeding children is one of the most fundamental ways child care supports the family specifically, and the community in general. It's an awesome privilege, but also an intimidating responsibility.

Realities of the Classroom

I've been a teacher, I've been a director. I know mealtimes aren't always popular with staff. There are some good reasons for this. Preschoolers painted head to toe with spaghetti sauce brings one reason to mind. (Only half jesting, I suggest sprinkler play after a lunch of spaghetti, chili mac, or sloppy joes!)

Even custodians have opinions about mealtimes. "Do you have to feed them that sticky rice? By the time I mop at night, it's glued to the floor." My reply: (1) Yes. (2) I know rice can be messy. (3) Thanks for the extra effort.

Lunch, in particular, can be hard on everyone. At the peak of the day, kids are played out, tired, and hungry. If children are coming from, or going to, half-day Head Start, kindergarten, or at-risk programs, the schedule is pressured. Stir into the brew short staffing and you wind up with anything but a relaxed meal service.

After five and a half cherished years as an early childhood teacher, in 1980 Karen Stephens became director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department.

Unfortunately, this often means staff approach mealtime as an undesirable chore, one to be dispensed with curtly, and peformed as quickly as possible. I once observed children leaving lunch. As each child got up, an assistant stacked their chair on the table top. She did this even while others remained at the table eating!

You see, she was hurrying to sweep the floor before setting out cots. While well intentioned, the routine went beyond unsanitary to disrespectful and inconsiderate. Rather than encouraging leisurely conversation, a silent message goaded children, "Get a move on, keep to the schedule, you're in my way!"

Feeding a group of up to 20 children (or more!) is a daunting challenge, especially with only two teachers in the classroom. But with creativity and dedication to children's well-being, enjoyable and educational meal experiences can be offered.

Importance of Planning for Mealtimes

Food service should set the stage for camaraderie, enjoyment, and learning, as well as satisfying one's hunger. Providing such meal service, brimming with a cornucopia of experiences, takes know-how. Teachers must reflect on child development and how children learn. They must anticipate children's behavior and assess needs and attitudes.

As with other classroom activities, mealtime requires planning and preparation. It takes ingenuity to capture and maintain children's interest and attention. It takes forethought and enthusiasm to prevent meal service from falling into a rut of boredom, day in and day out. It takes an alert intellect to capitalize on the learning opportunities inherent in the types of foods and meals offered.

Conducting mealtimes that are engaging, stimulating, and yet relaxing requires skill in guiding and sensitively responding to behavior. Excellent communication skills and a knack for conversation are a must. Providing all that isn't easy; it requires a motivated professional. Luckily, the kids have you!

The following ideas can help mealtime live up to its potential, in terms of socialization as well as curriculum enhancement. Let the suggestions trigger your imagination, then put your unique teaching and caregiving talents to work.

Counter Boredom with Atmosphere

Most child care teachers can't have lunch out often; you're having it with the kids. Since you can't go out for local color, create some of your own. Even if it's once a month, a little variety fights boredom.

Play "mood" music. It can be anything from rain forest sounds to a children's musical score. Play folk music from different countries and cultures. Expose children to various genres of music, such as classical, jazz, or blues music. If you have musically talented parents or staff, ask them to serenade lunching children.

Vary the lighting. Dim lights or have candles in protective glass globes on each table. Do you have a large indoor plant? Go romantic and string it with tiny white lights. Or go flamboyant by hanging trendy hot pepper lights. You'll be surprised how lighting can bring a hushed or festive tone to group meals.

Change your eating area. Children can decorate the table area with murals, collages, or drawings. Conduct an art project that results in children creating centerpieces or placemats. Take advantage of a play yard garden and ask children to create table bouquets. With staff and program parents, create the atmosphere of an ethnic restaurant, "French Bistro, anyone?"

Invite guests. This is a great way to introduce children to the art of being gracious. Use elegant (though washable!) tablecloths and cloth napkins. Guide children in making place cards. Teach practices of good hosts, such as showing guests to their seats and serving guests first.

Vary eating location. When weather permits, have a picnic under the canopy of a favorite tree. Brown bag it or pack baskets and hike to lunch at a nearby park.

Fostering Language and Literacy

Food is a great way to expand children's vocabulary and refine communication skills. Start by being a good role model. When food is delivered, model complete sentences and proper manners: "Derek, would you please help us get things started by passing the peas to Kelly. Thank you."

Once children are able to verbalize, encourage them to tell you which food they wish to pass (rather than allowing them to simply point or grunt). Saying "Tell me with words what you want" prompts children to articulate, to utilize vocabulary, and to be independent.

As children taste food, encourage them to describe it's flavor, texture, or color. From there, engage them in

conversation. Have they had the food before? When? How was it prepared? Who fixed it? Where do they think it was grown? Do they know how the food made its way to their table? Help pace the conversation so it's a give and take between children.

Highlight written language by linking literature with meals. For instance, before creating French ambiance, read Ludwig Bemelmans' *Madeline*. The topic of "picky eaters" can be discussed after reading the classic *Bread and Jam for Frances* by Russell Hoban. Hundreds of books can introduce children to the world of food and nutrition. Ask your librarian for suggestions!

Of course, with even the smallest encouragement, oral language and storytelling flourish during meals. One year, we had a child who never failed to dazzle us at lunch time. His expressive and enthusiastic flights of fancy touched children and staff. When he'd finish telling about whales under his bed, or his pet dragon, the children would cheerfully congratulate him, "That a great story, Nicholas!" As you might guess, he swore every story was true.

Curriculum Connections

Mealtime can be a vehicle for almost any curriculum area, whether it's science, social studies, health, safety, math, or literature. The trick is to help children recognize connections in daily life.

Obviously, opportunities for nutrition education are abundant during meal service. Basic concepts — such as food is fuel for the body, food can be prepared in a variety of ways, and the importance of eating different foods — come up naturally.

Health, safety, and sanitation principles can be illustrated daily. Disinfecting serving surfaces, washing hands before and after eating, never eating from serving utensils, and ways to prevent choking are all practices relevant to children's well-being.
Other curriculum connections can be made by inventive teachers. Are you investigating trees? Highlight science concepts by asking children to identify tree products in a meal, such as apples, pears, or even maple syrup. Math concepts are put to use when children set tables or divide food equally among themselves.

Cooking foods to include in meals is great curriculum, too. Have you taken a field trip to a potato farm? Bring back several kinds of potatoes. Involve children in cooking them in a variety of ways, i.e., baked, mashed, boiled, or scalloped. Teaching sanitation and safety will be part of the cooking process.

Cultural Collaborations

Children feel accepted, secure, and comfortable when offered familiar foods in daily menus. This is especially true when caring for children of diverse cultures. Your best resource for cultural collaboration is children's parents. Ask parents to submit favorite family recipes for use in menus. Ask parents to lend authentic cooking, or eating, tools. And, of course, invite them to eat meals with the children.

In our program, a mother from Nigeria prepared fried plantain for a snack. As is the custom in her country, she held a small bowl of plantain close to her lips and scooped the food into her mouth with a cupped hand. The children followed suit. I'll never forget their look of delight. Their eyes were saying, "Finally, someone around here knows how to eat!"

Explore cultural foods by taking field trips to authentic restaurants or specialty grocery stores. Invite specialty chefs to visit the classroom to demonstrate cooking techniques and style of presentation.

Countering Chaos

Not every meal service will be calm, or run smoothly. But that doesn't mean you can't aim for that. Working as a team, organizing the environment, planning engaging transitions, and communicating clear expectations help prevent harried meals.

Work as a team. Hungry children, sitting around with nothing to do, waiting for tables to be set, or food to be delivered, spells trouble. Delegate tasks among teacher, aide, and cook to prevent this. Work cooperatively to make sure tables are set before children are seated. Serving bowls of food should be on tables, ready for children to self-serve and pass. Divide responsibilities so everyone knows who will be helping children wash hands and who
will help them once seated.

Organize the environment. It's normal for young children to have occasional spills while eating. It is distracting and frustrating for kids and teachers. But if anticipated and planned for, mishaps are less of an interruption.

In our program, children eat meals in small groups, five to a table. Each table has a small plastic tub and a supply of paper towels for quick clean ups. At the end of lunch, children stack dishes in tubs for return to the kitchen. The tubs and towels encourage self-help skills while also reducing

traffic congestion caused by children frequently leaving seats.

Plan engaging transitions. Calmly moving groups of children through the classroom isn't easy. It takes forethought and imagination. Transitions, short activities that help children move from one area to another, are invaluable at mealtime. They limit aimless wandering behavior that can make mealtimes hectic.

Avoid a massive, explosive exodus to eating tables by bringing children together as a group first. After a short activity, limit chaos by gradually dispersing small groups of children to tables. Music, storytelling, book reading, or a puppet show are all calming and unifying activities before and after meals.

Children can be transitioned to and from group activities in a variety of ways. Remember, whatever the technique, it must do double duty. The process must encourage children to focus, think, and problem solve while at the same time preventing traffic jams in the bathroom and around eating tables.

Transitions should be varied daily to keep children's interest. For instance, one day children may leave the group to wash hands based on colors they are wearing — red, blue, yellow, etc. Other days, the criteria may be fabric patterns, such as plaid or polka dots. Types of shoes worn, species of pets owned, or names beginning with specific letters are other variables teachers use. Transitions can allow children to experiment with movement. For instance, ask children to tip toe, take giant steps, or hop like kangaroos on their way to the snack. With transitions, your imagination is the only limit!

Communicate clear expectations. Children always cooperate better when they hear specifically what they should do, rather than vaguely what they shouldn't do. It's more effective to say "I expect you to walk to the table" than to badger and nag, "Don't run, don't be so loud, stop being wild. . . ."

From time to time, remind children of your goal of a pleasant meal. Ask them to generate rules, or courtesies, each should follow so others aren't annoyed or aggravated.

Whenever possible, suggest appropriate alternatives to improper eating behavior. For instance, tell an over eager child, "When you've chewed and swallowed, I'll be glad to listen to your story." Remind the child with wandering hands that people don't like food on their plate to be touched by others. If necessary, enforce a consequence.

Dining As a Social Experience

Most of us don't think of meals served at child care as "dining." But we should. More important than the foods offered, and more important than the manners taught, are the relationships formed as individuals eat and talk together. As children converse, they'll grow to appreciate each other as individuals with unique points of view and experiences.

Today, as a director, I sit at meals and hear children and teachers discussing work or classroom projects. And, of course, I get to catch up on the latest child care gossip. I find out who has a sibling on the way, and whose parent got a speeding ticket en route to child care. From my own days of teaching, I hold dear many intriguing lunch time conversations. One earnest debate still captivates me. Over several weeks, a group of my four and five year olds discussed their philosophies about God. One child was sure his school principal was "God of everyone." Another said, no, he couldn't be, because God isn't a person, he's something that lives in your heart.

Ah, it still moves me, such meaningful dialogue from such unassuming, innocently sincere theorists. For my budding theologians, the meal simply served as a centerpiece, a backdrop. Really at center stage was the human quest to share ideas, to understand, to be heard. And that's meal service, that's dining, at its best; a civilized expression of people reaching out to one another with their hearts and minds.

Resources

Meals without Squeals: Child Care Feeding Guide and Cookbook, by Christine Berman, MPH, RD, and Jacki Fromer (Bull Publishing Co., 1991).

Teaching Children About Food: A Teaching and Activities Guide, by Christine Berman, MPH, RD, and Jacki Fromer (Bull Publishing Co., 1991).

Foodworks: Over 100 Science Activities and Fascinating Facts That Explore the Magic of Food, from the Ontario Science Centre (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1987). (Activities are geared for school-agers.)

Creative Food Experiences for Children, by Mary T. Goodwin and Gerry Pollen (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 1974).