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Mealtime — From Chaos to Calm

by Sarah A. Mulligan

Serving meals in early childhood programs isn't exactly like serving a meal in an elegant restaurant — it's more like a boisterous family meal with the added intensity that comes from having a group of children with different needs, interests, backgrounds, and experiences. Providing a nutritious meal while at the same time making mealtime a productive and educational part of the day requires skill, practice, and planning. No matter how carefully planned and implemented, however, mealtime is certain to occasionally add chaos and extra challenge to an already busy day.

Mealtime represents a significant portion of the child care routine and should be considered part of the curriculum, not a break in the day. Many of the frustrations associated with mealtime occur because it is not planned as thoroughly as other parts of the day. Menu planning is just one part of the preparation that is required. Careful consideration must also be given to the way that children are expected to participate and interact, the skills and practice opportunities that will be included, and the relationship between mealtime and other curriculum activities.

Successful mealtimes build on the developmental skills and abilities of the children and require that adults have a thorough understanding of the needs and abilities of each child. Planning ensures that the food served is prepared and served in a way that matches the needs of the children and that opportunities for learning become an integral part of the meal. The key to planning is to gather the adults who will participate in the meal together to coordinate what is served and how the meal is conducted.

Good Food

Young children should be offered high quality, nutritious foods in small quantities frequently throughout the day. It is important that the foods offered be rich in nutrients and be prepared in a way that is appealing. The early childhood setting presents a wonderful opportunity to introduce new foods and to expose children to a variety of cultural foods.

While most early childhood programs serve nutritious food, getting children to eat the food served can be handled in different ways. Children should be offered — but not required to eat — the food served. Some children react to the visual presentation of the food and are reluctant to try a food that looks different or is prepared in a new way. That doesn't mean that new foods shouldn't be offered, it simply recognizes a possible, less-than-favorable response from the children. A new food may need to be offered several times before the child is willing to try it.

Some programs implement the one-bite rule requiring a child to take at

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least one bite of each food served. Although this strategy often results in children trying new foods, it also creates a struggle with children who are reluctant or anxious about eating an unfamiliar food. Forcing a child to take a bite will very likely turn mealtime into a power struggle instead of a learning experience. An alternative strategy is to teach the child about the food and set up opportunities to try new foods as an accent to more familiar foods. In this way, the child can relieve hunger by eating foods that are known and liked and trying new foods is driven by a sense of adventure not physical hunger. Because children enjoy participating in food preparation, opportunities to make and then try a new food like eggplant, lentils, or rye bread often encourage exploration with new foods.

Something Different

Early childhood programs are in many ways extensions of the child's home, yet when it comes to foods there can be as much dissimilarity as there is similarity in type and preparation of foods. Cultural differences, food sensitivities or allergies, special feeding needs related to disabilities, and dietary choices (vegetarian, vegan, macrobiotic, etc.) are all important mealtime considerations. Each provides an opportunity for both the family and the early childhood program to join together to create a mealtime experience that recognizes the child's needs within the context of the family.

Identifying and meeting these special needs requires accurate communication between parents and program staff. This communication begins at the time of referral/enrollment as families are encouraged to share their family story including food preferences, restrictions, and requirements. The family may share a dietary preference that the entire family has embraced or a special need or restriction that affects the child.

Some specialized diets require intense cooperation. A vegan diet, for example, is significantly different than that typically served in a child care setting. For those who are not vegan, it may be difficult to understand the nutritional guidelines as well as the rationale for this choice. Respecting the family's food choices is a critical element in working with the family to ensure the child's nutritional needs are met while in the early childhood program.

If program staff are to be able to implement an alternative diet, they must fully understand the family's food preferences and then have clear guidelines from the family about what the child can and cannot eat. A family might identify items on the regular menu that their child can eat and then supplement with foods from home.

Including a child with a different diet adds to the cultural richness of the program and provides a wonderful opportunity to learn about and celebrate differences. Food preferences and dietary restrictions are serious and must be handled with sensitivity and compassion so that the child is not made to feel different simply because of food choices.

If children bring food from home, whether because of a special diet or because it is part of the program's mealtime structure, there is a built-in need to have the food fit the nutritional goals of the child care program. Sometimes, however, what a particular family values may or may not fit with the nutritional values of the program. For example, a family that sends candy bars for the child's breakfast may not fit nutritionally with what the program hopes to provide by serving breakfast first thing in the morning.

This is as much a communication as a nutritional issue. Families need input about the kinds of foods that would be appropriate. They also need a better understanding of what your expectations are. If morning snack is actually more like breakfast, be sure to explain the kinds of foods that are typically sent and those that you feel would not be appropriate. Some families may send food that is unfamiliar or unusual but still provides for the nutritional needs of the child. For example, a family may send a dish with vegetables and noodles for breakfast. While not typically considered a breakfast food, this is nutritionally sound and probably represents food that the child is accustomed to eating in the morning.

Some children have special mealtime concerns which may include allergies, food sensitivities, or a difficulty chewing and swallowing foods. Each of these special needs represents a challenge at mealtime that is best overcome if staff are equipped with a thorough understanding of the child's needs. It is helpful to have an opportunity to talk with and ask questions of the child's parent or an individual who fully understands the child's needs.

If the child has a food allergy, staff members need to know what foods to withhold but they also need to know how to respond in case the child inadvertently consumes a sensitive food. A toddler who is allergic to wheat, for example, may have a reaction when *tasting* play dough made with flour and water.

In some cases, a demonstration of how to help a child with special feeding needs may be necessary. If, for example, a child uses a special cup, watching someone offer the cup to the child may be better than a verbal description. A child's special feeding needs often pose a challenge

to program staff because they are different, not because they are impossible to integrate into a group mealtime.

Before, During, and After — How It's Done

The most important parts of a meal are what happens before, what happens during, and what happens after. In other words, everything about how the meal is served is important! Some programs serve meals in a cafeteria style in which children are served by the adults. This style is often used because it is efficient and quick. Consider again the goal of making mealtime part of the curriculum instead of a break in the day. It becomes less important to get the meal over with as soon as possible and more important to build in teachable moments before, during, and after the meal.

In order to be learning throughout the meal, young children need to be engaged in the meal. They need to be involved in every possible way from setting the table and preparing the food to cleaning up afterwards. Children need to be allowed to set the pace and tone of the meal. If the meal takes ten minutes longer because the children are actively engaged in learning to use tongs to serve themselves green beans, those extra ten minutes are well worth it.

Family-style meals are meals served much as they would be in a family home with the adult sitting down with the children as a participant in the meal. The meal consists of numerous opportunities for everyone to be involved serving themselves, and the interactions between people at the table becomes as important as the food being served. In an environment rich in learning opportunities, family-style meals are a logical way to approach mealtime.

Many of the negative child-to-child interactions that are commonly seen during mealtime in group settings can be eliminated with two simple steps. The first is to have skillful, knowledgeable adults who know the children well sit and eat with the children. Admittedly, this can create a scheduling problem in programs that give teachers a break during mealtime, but the advantages are clear. Programs in which children eat with a caring adult at the table enjoy meals that have a comfortable, relaxed tone, a decrease in negative behaviors, and an increase in opportunities for learning. When adults join the children for mealtime and participate as a member of the group, there are numerous opportunities for modeling social behaviors, teaching about different foods, and ensuring that each child participates.

Adults also play a critical role in setting the tone and pace of the meal. Having two or more adults rushing around serving children, cleaning spills, and hurrying children who are eating too slowly effectively changes the meal from a relaxing and enjoyable experience to one of chaos.

Ideally, the adults who know the children best are the adults who eat with them so that the experiences that occur at other times can be integrated into mealtimes. Mealtime is an important learning time and adults need to be available to the children without having additional responsibilities.

The second step is to increase the opportunities for children to be active participants in the meal. The more chances children have to be productively involved, the more chances there are for learning and the less likely it will be that the children will become distracted by less appropriate behaviors. This step can best be achieved by looking for any way in which the children assist in preparing, serving, eating, and cleaning up.

Children seated at the table waiting for adults to serve them are likely to become impatient. On the other hand, if children are busily washing hands, getting out their dishes, and gathering at a table that is ready with food and child-sized serving dishes, there are fewer opportunities for distraction. Similarly, when each meal includes intriguing serving utensils like ice cream scoops and tongs, the children are readily engaged in learning and practicing motor skills as well as eating nutritious foods.

Mealtime is undeniably a part of the typical child care routine. Most programs offer several meals and snacks throughout the day which provide a large percentage of the child's overall nutritional intake. Just as importantly, these meals and snacks provide an invaluable opportunity to demonstrate the power of a successful, child-directed curriculum. When mealtime is integrated into the day as a vital part of the overall curriculum, it becomes a window through which to observe the impact of a quality early childhood experience. The next time a family wants to observe your program, why not suggest they come at mealtime?