

## Who Needs the Mess? Family-Style Meals

by Gigi Schweikert

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As early childhood professionals, we tend to conquer the days, quickly transitioning from one activity to the next, setting up and cleaning up, and somehow thinking that even the slightest momentary pause in our rapid pace will result in ensuing preschool chaos. We're professionals on the move, and that includes mealtime. Although we have a high tolerance for kiddy activity and noise, there's something about our organized, teacher-directed selves that derives great satisfaction from toys neatly placed on shelves, little nap mats all lined in a row and prepared plates of food ready to be eaten by "just come from the playground" kids.

Let's face it, teachers can do it faster and more efficiently, and children are hungry. No time to waste. Why not dish it out and serve it up? Most of us pour the drinks in little cups, set out food-filled plates before every chair, roam the aisles with a roll of paper towels anticipating the first spill of the day, and grab a bite on the run as we scurry to dole out seconds or stand and chat with another teacher. And for a brief moment, the room is quiet with the hush of small bellies filling up. Ah! We can admit it, one of the best things about the lunchtime rush is that naptime is soon to follow. Now there's a time of day that every early childhood professional can appreciate.

### From roaming to resting

So what do you suppose would happen if we went from roaming to resting or at least sitting down with our children at mealtimes? Is it possible we might never get up again? Is there just too much to do to sit down and eat? Actually, there is too much to do, so much to teach children during mealtimes that we can't afford not to sit down. Eating is an activity all

of us will do every day for the rest of our lives for physical nourishment and social enjoyment. In preschool, we spend lots of time teaching little ones to cut and glue, but not a lot of time teaching table manners, how to select and serve yourself food, or the give and take of social conversation. Imagine an adult who can make an awesome construction paper heart, but can't sit still for a meal.

### Mealtime is curriculum time

During meals, children learn social skills, language, fine motors skills, math concepts like one-to-one correspondence and ordering objects. They learn how to make choices, to develop greater self-confidence and the list goes on. Perhaps as educators, we should invest as much planning, preparation, and evaluation in meals as we do for other activities. Maybe we even need to give mealtime a spot on our curriculum plan.

### Family-style meals

So how do you make the most of mealtime in the preschool setting? Serving family-style meals is the best way to give children the optimum opportunity for learning all the skills we mentioned. What is family style? In today's world that might be defined as piling all the kids in the back of the mini-van and heading to the local, fast-food drive-thru. But actually, a family-style meal means gathering around the table with bowls of food for self-serving and pleasant conversation in a leisurely, relaxed atmosphere. And since the family meal is not always happening as often as it probably should in today's busy families, that's all the more reason for us to create and allow time for a comfortable lunchtime routine.

## Restaurant style or family style?

Okay, we all agree that kids learn lots during meal-time, but is it really worth all the trouble and time? It's easier and a lot less mess if we just serve the food ourselves to the children and then sit down with the kids and chat. Isn't that enough? That's a great start and a good first step for those of us who haven't been sitting with our children and role-modeling good eating habits; but for children to gain the full benefit of family-style meals, they need to learn to serve themselves and even pour their own drinks. Yes, it can be a mess, but almost everything in our field is a bit messy, from easel paint to difficult parents. Remember, you don't have to go from restaurant style to family style in one meal. You can transition slowly or perhaps start with a family-style snack.

## Making family-style meals work

In the early childhood setting, family-style meals involve having the children help with table setting, self-serving, and cleaning up. Most children are eager to participate in these grown-up activities. We often need to allow more time for meals when children help, because they usually work more slowly and deliberately. But keep in mind that we're not trying to rush; mealtime is curriculum time. If the children's set-up takes a bit longer and bellies are growling, start earlier.

## Transitioning to family-style meals: Mealtime tips

As educators, we all have certain social and cultural expectations of what constitutes appropriate meal-time behavior for children, and adults. We know in our own minds how a good meal goes, but somehow our expectations of children's behavior are often unrealistic. Isn't it funny how we patiently and laboriously work with young children on how to form the first letter of their name or tie their shoe; but when it comes to eating, we're often shocked and amazed that kids don't come programmed with how to's for using utensils and common etiquette? Why are we so shocked when the same young child who ate a big glob of glue during arts and crafts, grabs a handful of mashed potatoes from the serving bowl and happily stuffs them into his mouth? It's probably one of the reasons that we hold the reins of mealtime

control so firmly. Just like we have to teach children not to eat glue, we have to teach them how to eat food properly. There's so much for us to do. Here are some tips to get you started:

■ **Prepare for messy eaters and spills.** Most kids are messy when it comes to eating. Even when children understand the expectations of using utensils and napkins, the emerging development of their motor skills may prevent them from always "making their mouth." And we can expect food to fall and drinks to spill, but don't give up just because of the mess. One of the benefits of family-style meals is that children learn to eat more slowly and carefully by watching us and their peers.

■ **Have extra supplies near by.** Besides the mess, one of the major reasons that most early childhood educators don't participate in family-style meals is the constant "getting up and down" during meals to assist children. For spills, keep a roll of paper towels by your chair. Have the food cart nearby, so you can easily refill the serving bowls. Have extra plates and utensils to replace ones that children drop on the floor. A picnic caddy works great. Before you know it, you'll be able to hand a child a few paper towels for a spill without even interrupting your conversation.

■ **Allow more time for meals.** No matter how frightening the family-style meal plan may sound to you, keep in mind that the meal itself will probably only take about 15 or 20 minutes of eating and chatting time at the table. And wouldn't it be nice to actually sit down and enjoy the conversations of the young ones in our company? Set-up and clean-up will probably take about 15 minutes each.

■ **Establish a few rules.** Make sure everyone washes their hands before helping with table setting or sitting down to eat. Remind the children to use the serving utensils to touch the food and to eat or talk; but not both at once, to avoid choking. The table talk will be lively and children will need guidance about giving everyone an opportunity to speak. If you find yourself constantly correcting the children, relax a bit and concentrate on maintaining a fun and relaxed atmosphere. The children will learn proper table manners and how to behave by watching you.

■ **Use small serving bowls and utensils.** Use small, safe serving bowls and small pitchers. Plastic

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measuring cups with a spout work well as small pitchers. You may have to experiment with a variety of containers before you find the ones that work well for you. Help the children succeed by using bowls that they can lift easily or a least slide across the table to their neighbor.

■ **Help the children.** In early childhood, helping is what we do. And family style eating will require lots of help, especially initially. Have an extra set of serving containers and plates that children can use in the dramatic play area to enjoy setting the table and having their own mealtimes. Use an extra set of little pitchers in the water table to practice pouring. But don't drink it. As children learn to serve, help them hold the bowl or guide them to put just a small amount of food on the serving spoon.

■ **Respect children's choices.** You know those reality shows where they make people eat all kinds of disgusting stuff? That's how intense eating a new food can be for a young child. The flavors and textures of certain foods can be intolerable for some children. Continue to encourage children to try new foods, but don't force them. You may have to introduce a food many times before a child tries it. Another benefit of family-style meals is that picky eaters often try new foods when they see their peers or you eating them.

■ **Respect children's appetites.** Many children need encouragement to eat even the foods they like. They are so interested in the world around them that it is often difficult to focus on eating. When everyone sits down, including the teacher, and the activity of the

room is focused only on the mealtime table, children are more likely to eat. Most children have a good sense of their bodies and stop eating when they are full, so don't force children to eat. A handful of food is enough for most preschoolers. If you are concerned about a child's eating habits, either eating too little or too much, suggest that the parent speak to their child's pediatrician.

■ **Eat the same food as the children.** If you're thinking "yuck," then perhaps it's time to help prepare more appetizing meals — or maybe healthy eating is hard for you, too. Either way, even adults don't always like their vegetables. But if we're expecting the children to eat it, shouldn't we be willing to eat it, too? Children will learn the most about healthy eating by watching us. Sure, we all have our favorite "pick-me-up" snacks, but save those for break time and not in sight of the children. Imagine eating green beans when someone else is chomping on chips.

## Who needs the mess? We do!

It's easy to resist family-style meals — the time, the work, the mess. But as educators, we do lots of difficult, time-consuming projects and activities with kids because we know it's good for them. And family-style meals are good for them. We'd never give up on teaching a child to speak or helping them learn to use the toilet, and eating is just as important. If the idea of family style is overwhelming, start small. Have children set the table and assist you in cleaning up. But most important, sit down and enjoy. And remember, naptime always comes right after lunch.

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by Kay Albrecht

**Take small steps:** If your program isn't using family-style meal service, gather teachers around a communal table and discuss what parts might work. Break it down and find starting places as a group. Then, make a pact to try it out. Reconvene to discuss what works, what didn't, and to make modifications. Then, try again. As Schweikert says, it will be more than worth it!

**Overcoming obstacles:** Teachers may be reluctant to try this idea without seeing it in process. Arrange for teachers to visit a program with family-style food service already in place. Before the visit, ask teachers to make a list of what they want to focus their observations on so the time is well spent and gathers the necessary data. Have teachers report on their visits and discuss what they learned from the observation.