

Mealtime Memo

FOR CHILD CARE



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Adults Influence What Children Eat

Parents and child care providers are often referred to as the “gatekeepers,” deciding which foods to offer and when meals and snacks will be served. Adults may influence the eating practices of children in the child care setting in diverse and complex ways. Early studies have suggested that preschool children were more likely to eat foods if they saw an adult eat the foods. Developing healthy eating habits is of prime importance to preschoolers. Establishing a routine of offering children three meals a day plus snacks may help motivate children to eat a variety of foods at each meal.



Parental Influence

Early parental influence has an enduring effect on an individual’s feeding practices. When adults select or ignore certain foods, they are simply connecting to those same food choices parents made for them in early childhood.

There are a number of ways parents can influence preschool children’s eating practices.

- Parents can control foods that enter the household and how that food is prepared.
- Parents determine where, when, and how often the family eats outside the home.
- When children observe their mothers eating an unfamiliar food, they are more receptive to trying the new food. Studies have demonstrated that if mothers are unwilling to try new foods the children may model their parent’s dislike for the same new foods.
- Parents can influence whether the child, based on the food socialization practices of the family, receives a particular food optimistically or pessimistically.

- In order to maintain or control children’s behaviors, two food-related parenting styles have emerged: permissive and authoritarian. Parents who are permissive when it pertains to food styles basically allow the child to eat what he or she wishes. Parents who use the authoritarian style to manipulate the child’s food intake do so through commands, force, instructions, or directives. Even though a great deal of literature on the parenting styles has been gathered, further research must be done to clarify all the factors that influence use of these distinctly different styles.¹

Child Care Provider Influence

In recent years child care providers have assumed a role that was typically held by parents—deciding what foods are purchased, prepared, and served to children in their care. Due to this development, child care providers have



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an opportunity to encourage healthful eating behaviors by designing a “child-friendly” environment. To assist child care providers in making mealtime for children an experience to learn from and enjoy, USDA developed *Building Blocks For Fun and Healthy Meals, A Menu Planner for the Child and Adult Care Food Program*. Chapter seven addresses the importance of building a child-centered program. Characteristics of a “child-friendly” environment include the following:

Meals and snacks offer special opportunities for:

- Providing happy, relaxed experiences
- Helping children develop positive food attitudes
- Building children’s confidence
- Building children’s social skills
- Communicating with parents and others

To make the most of these opportunities, try to...

- Achieve quality service. Make sure meals are both attractive and tasty.
- Encourage social interaction. Teach children the social aspects of dining as well as how to feed themselves.
- Make mealtime a happy time. Provide a transition or quiet time just before meals so that mealtime can be relaxed. Make sure the room is attractive and appealing for young children. Use bright colors and decorations that children like.
- Avoid making children feel rushed. Allow children to take their own time to eat. Having to eat in a



hurry may spoil the pleasure of eating. Short meal times may also encourage poor eating habits. For example, children who are feeling pressured may choose to quickly consume their favorite foods and ignore other nutritious foods in the meal. They may learn to eat too rapidly, a habit that may lead to overeating and obesity.

- Make the most of your menus. Use your menus as a tool to communicate with parents. Send a copy of your menus home with the children. Include your phone number and let parents know they can approach you.
- Add excitement to your meals. Expand on activities and cultural events happening in the classroom. Plan activities and/or special meals around holidays or other special events such as the beginning of spring, National Apple Week, and National Nutrition Month.

Applying what we’ve learned...

Parents and child care providers are responsible for what kind of food is offered to children and the manner in which it is offered. Children decide if and how much of the offered food is eaten. Food preferences of the child should be considered when menus are being planned. The primary goal is to gain the respect of children being fed either at home or in a child care facility. Eating should be an enjoyable experience for children. The responsibility for providing the pleasant environment that will enhance this experience falls upon the parents, child care providers, and other adults.

Sources

¹Nicklas, T.A., Baranowski, T., Baranowski, J.C., Cullen, K., Rittenberry, L., Olvera, N., (July 2001) *Family and child-care provider influences on preschool children’s fruit, juice, and vegetable consumption*, Nutrition Reviews, Vol. 59, No. 7.

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