



Chatting with Children at Mealtimes

Creating a Climate for Communication

Almost everyone, from the young toddler to the older adult, enjoys talking and having others listen. Few activities in life are more important than communicating effectively with one another. Effective communication is the basis for developing healthy and mutually rewarding child-to-child relationships and adult-to-child relationships. You can make mealtimes even more special by encouraging a climate that fosters communication. When you pay attention to children and encourage communication, you help children create a positive view of themselves and the world they live in.

Mealtime can be an important time to encourage communication. A nutritious meal is of little value to a child if it is not eaten and enjoyed. Make it one of your goals to serve meals in a relaxed, social atmosphere. Think of mealtime as a communication time, a time when you can converse with, nurture, and obtain feedback from children. Consider removing the distractions of scattered projects, unfinished activities, and the television from the eating area.

Children need adults to eat with them. When adults eat with children they can:

- serve as role models by their food choices,
- protect children from safety hazards such as cross-contamination and choking hazards, and
- encourage conversation at mealtimes.

How toddlers (12 to 36 months) communicate

Toddlers communicate with a combination of grunts and gestures. They may use one- to multiple-word sentences. Toddlers use movements and actions that are easiest or most familiar to communicate. They may point to a food they want. They may knock a food away if they do not want it. They have many positive and negative emotional

expressions. The parent or caregiver should attempt to understand what the toddler is communicating. This comes with time and patience.

Encouraging toddler communication about food and during mealtimes

- Expand on toddlers' one- and two-word communications and build sentences around their word (*e.g., Cold, that's right, ice cream is cold. Both the tomato and the radish are red. Do you see something else that is red?*)
- Keep a word diary to record the toddler's new words. These can be shared with others.
- Give toddlers one direction at a time (*e.g., You can sit in the chair next to Mary.*)
- Make the most of daily routines and talk toddlers through routines in the sequence in which they will happen (*e.g., First I'll turn on the water. We will add the soap. Rub your hands together to get rid of all of the germs.*)
- Reinforce with word labels what the toddler is doing (*e.g., You are using warm water and soap. You are washing between your fingers.*)
- Respond quickly and predictably to toddlers' communication efforts (*e.g., You are pointing at the refrigerator, do you want some milk?*)
- Label toddlers' emotions (*e.g., When your tummy is filled, you are happy.*)

How preschoolers (3 to 6 years) communicate

Preschoolers begin to talk in sentences that are grammatically correct even though the sequence may be incorrect. They like to talk about past experiences and may pretend to have imaginary experiences or friends. Preschoolers often talk to themselves when playing and working on tasks. They may understand what a written word stands for without having actual recognition such as a stop sign or the name of a fast food restaurant.

Remember: The best adult-to-child relationships are characterized by lots of positive communication and interaction. Adults and children in quality child care facilities communicate regularly about many different things. Understanding how children of different ages communicate and what they like to talk about keeps the lines of communication flowing freely. Adults need to take the lead and communicate in a way that relates to the biological and emotional age of the child. By paying attention to and communicating regularly with children, you can help children create a view of themselves and the world that is positive and healthy.

Encouraging preschooler communication about food and during mealtimes

- Ask questions about past events and probe for details (e.g., *Tell me about a meal you had with your family. Who was present? Where did you eat?*)
- Provide an explanation when correcting behavior or offering alternatives (e.g., *When you use the serving spoon, it is easier to scoop the mashed potatoes.*)
- Encourage talk about feelings, both positive and negative. Be there as a friend. Discuss possible causes for emotions.
- Create opportunities to engage in fantasy and pretend play

about food and mealtimes, either alone or with friends (e.g., *Let's pretend you are going to plan a meal for the president. What would you serve? What foods do you think the president likes? Where would you have the meal?*)

- Think of ways you can increase the preschooler's opportunity to make choices and communicate in more advanced ways (e.g., *Be certain there are always choices to be made by the child. Remember to honor those choices.*)
- Provide consistency of communication opportunities. Try not to allow stressors in your life interfere with your willingness to be available for the child.

Activity: GERMS on the RUN!

While you and the children are washing hands, try this ditty:



Washing hands can be fun, fun, fun
Germs on the run, run, run
Power 'em out – POW
Power 'em out – Ka-zow!
Germs on the run, run, run

Remember these handwashing instructions:

- Use running water and soap
- Wash for 20 seconds
- Rinse
- Dry with a paper towel

Adapted from *Building Blocks for Fun and Healthy Meals*

Activity: I CAN FIND THE...

While eating with toddlers, suggest that everyone play the game, "I CAN FIND THE..."

Think of foods or utensils that can be described by either a characteristic, color, or texture. Ask the toddler if he/she can find it. Then ask the toddler to say what it is or if the child does not know the word, respond with, "Yes, that is a red fruit, it is an apple."

Some ideas:

- Can you find the red fruit?
- Can you find something that is round and small?
- Can you find something that has a seed inside?
- Can you find something that is sticky?
- Can you find something that makes it easy to pour milk?
- Can you find something you "really like"?
- Can you find something your mother likes?

Sources

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