

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Keep Mealtime Safe in Child Care Settings

Topic Area: Health and Safety
Subtopic Area: Food Safety

Objective: Recall four ways to serve safe foods to young children.

During the early years, food safety is one of the most important factors for keeping children safe. Young children under the age of five years are at a higher risk for foodborne illnesses because their immune systems have not fully developed. A foodborne illness, also known as food poisoning, can cause nausea, vomiting, or even death. Therefore, focusing on good food safety practices at mealtimes can promote overall good health in young children.

Children and adults should wash their hands before handling foods and mealtimes:

Keeping hands clean through proper handwashing is one of the most important ways for overall good health in children and adults. It helps to reduce the risk of spreading illness-causing germs that can lead to disease and serious health conditions.

Follow these steps to wash hands properly before mealtimes or activities with foods:

- Step 1.** Wet hands with clean, running water.
- Step 2.** Apply soap, and lather hands by rubbing them together.
- Step 3.** Vigorously scrub hands for at least 20 seconds.
- Step 4.** Rinse hands well under clean, running water.
- Step 5.** Dry hands using a clean, single-use paper towel .
- Step 6.** Use a towel to turn off the faucet and open any doors.



Children should be seated at a table when eating:

Some children may choose to stand out of habit or if they feel rushed to eat. However, walking while eating or drinking is not safe. It can cause children to choke on food and liquids, even if those foods do not normally pose a choking risk. Keep these tips in mind to help children have a positive mealtime experience while reducing their risk of choking:

- Discuss the importance of sitting during mealtimes before the beginning of meals and snacks.
- Allow at least 30 minutes for meals and 20 minutes for snacks.
- Redirect children to their chairs if one should stand.
- Positively reinforce sitting by praising those children who are seated in their chairs.
- Restate the importance of being seated during mealtimes.
- Encourage children to eat slowly and chew their foods.

Serve family style meals the safe way:

Family style meal service allows children to serve themselves with the assistance of adults (if needed). It offers several benefits to young children, such as promoting the development of decision-making, fine motor, and social skills. Although this meal service is the most ideal for young children, it does present some safety challenges if children are not provided time, practice, and good modeling from adults.

One challenge is food safety. Sometimes, children may attempt to eat from the serving bowl, place their hands in the serving bowl, or spill food on themselves. For these reasons, it is important to complete the following:

- Discuss expectations for family style meals before and after mealtimes.

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- Model how to serve meals family style, by sitting and eating with the children.
- Provide opportunities for children to practice scooping, pouring, and passing.
- Praise children for serving themselves, but also support them when they make mistakes.

Avoid foods that could cause young children to choke:

Any food can cause a choking risk for children below the age of four. However, the following foods increase the risk of choking and should be avoided or prepared in a way that is safe for young children.

- Hot dogs, including sausages, meat sticks, and cheese sticks
- Nuts and seeds
- Chunks of meat or cheese
- Whole grapes, cherries, berries, melon balls, and cherry tomatoes
- Hard or sticky candy
- Popcorn
- Spoonfuls of peanut butter
- Chunks of raw vegetables
- Chewing gum
- Apples or hard fruits that are not cut properly

In conclusion, keep these four good practices in mind when serving meals to young children. It can help to keep them safe during meal services or food-related activities. For additional information on serving safe meals to young children, refer to your sponsor or regulatory agency.

References:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2015). *Choking prevention*. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/Choking-Prevention.aspx>
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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service through an agreement with the Institute of Child Nutrition at the University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.

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