



# Mealtime Memo

## for Child Care

### Tips for Serving Meals Family-Style

Mealtimes are important, and children are usually happy and excited to eat when it is mealtime. Some of the excitement may come from sitting with friends at the table, being able to handle or pass the food, or being able to choose how much food they want to take. Children have a sense of ownership when they are able to make decisions about what they eat. Family-style meal service (FSMS) provides a great opportunity to make mealtime an even more exciting time for children.

When meals are served family-style, the food is placed in serving bowls, plates, dishes, and the beverage is placed in pitchers on the table. The children and adults sit and eat together. The children serve themselves with the assistance of an adult(s). All cups, plates, forks, serving bowls, and other utensils are child-sized.



There are a number of benefits for incorporating FSMS. For example, it helps children to develop their motor skills, teaches them how to share, and it helps build self-esteem and confidence. Also, children will eat based on their hunger, improve their social skills, and learn table manners. Children will also improve their language skills by having conversations with the teacher and other children while sitting at the table.

You can begin FSMS by choosing a date for your center (or your home) to start. Talk to the staff and children about FSMS, what it involves, how to do it, and how it works. Tell them when to expect the child care center to start using FSMS. Start the process of teaching children how to participate in FSMS, and be excited as you explain it. Tell them they will sit together as a group to eat, like a family sits at the table at home to eat. Show them what the table will look like, include examples of the plates, pitchers, and other items. Have the children sit at the table and pass an empty bowl from person to person while they pretend to put food on their plate. Explain the importance of being careful when pouring liquids and when passing the food. Teach them that they may slide the bowl if they cannot pick it up without dropping it.



There are two key ways to introduce FSMS to young children through nutrition related activities. First, you can plan nutrition education around the food you serve. Tell the children what nutrients the food has and how the nutrients help their body. Second, read stories about how to grow the foods they may eat at mealtime. Allow them to have an indoor garden. Finally, if possible, allow them to taste the food they are growing.

## Tips for Success

Here are some additional tips for serving meals family-style.

- Prepare to serve meals family-style by purchasing the appropriate items such as colorful serving bowls and child-sized dinnerware. You may also want to consider having flowers or other décor for the table.
- Show the children how to set the table and then have them take turns doing it. Show them where the plate, cup, bowl, or fork should be placed. They can also practice setting the table during play time.
- Be a good role model and sit with the children to encourage them to try new food. Encourage them to try the food by asking the children what the food tastes like, such as sweet or salty. A taste test is a great way to introduce children to the concepts of sour, salty, sweet, and bitter.



**Note:** Always make sure there is enough food on each table for every child to get a full CACFP serving.

## References

USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2016, October 27). Supplement d: Create a positive meal environment from *Nutrition and wellness tips for young children: Provider handbook for the CACFP*. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nutrition-wellness-tips-young-children>

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