

Mealtime Memo

for Child Care

Family Meals – Oh Yea!!!

Child care providers know how important it is for young children to receive nutritious meals on a daily basis. The updated CACFP nutrition standards provide the requirements for serving nutritious meals to young children whose caregivers participate in this program. Family style meal service (FSMS) is a popular option for meeting these requirements promoted and recommended by USDA.

According to KidsHealth from Nemours, “*Family meals are making a comeback*” with parents and children in their homes, too. The food served during family meal time usually includes more nutritious fruits, vegetables, and whole grains according to KidsHealth. Additional benefits of family meals include children learning and improving social skills, language skills, and table manners. Children have more conversations with family members when eating family style which may bring families closer. Families sit and eat together at the table, as they have conversations with one another and pass food around the table. Children eat based on their hunger and learn to try new food. Perhaps there are ways you, as a provider, can encourage other caregivers and parents to provide family meals in their home.



During meal time, family members gather and eat together (much the same way students and teachers do in child care). In many cases the children will also help set the table and/or prepare food items. This can easily be achieved at home. Have children ask their parents if they can sit together at home and eat dinner as a family while they talk about their day at school. Children can help with different tasks when preparing foods as well as when cleaning up. For example, young children can help prepare salads by washing the vegetables and tearing the lettuce.

According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (January 2018), family meal times can help to foster family unity, prevent behavior problems at home and school, enhance academic success, improve nutrition, and promote healthy weight for kids.



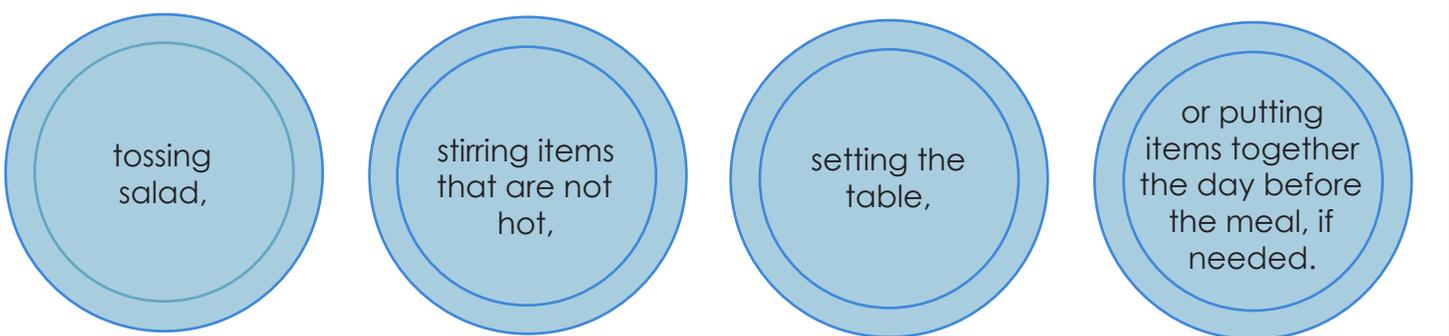
Perhaps you could give newsletters to parents about family meals and encourage them to try it at home. Provide information regarding healthful food choices to help parents choose a variety of healthy foods from all the food groups. Think of the CACFP meal pattern when suggesting what foods to include. Also, mention that food cooked and served at home will likely be more nutritious than ready-made, store-bought food. Another plus of cooking at home is that children will eat better and snack less. Suggest starting on weekends since that may work better for the family. Weekdays may be added once they are comfortable with the process and preparation procedures. It may take time for it to become a routine in the household; however, it will be worth the hard work.

Remember, talk to parents about the guidelines you follow at school. Explain that you never pressure children to take or eat food. You may encourage them but allow them to eat based on their hunger. Children will choose the food they want to eat from healthy foods they are offered. Overall, they are exposed to healthy eating behaviors such as trying new nutritious foods and making healthful food choices. Be enthusiastic about eating meals together. Make it exciting to hear about and to do at school and at home!

For children who are currently in child care that provides FSMS, they may already help set the table daily, so they will know how to set it at home. Children that have not learned this skill yet can still easily learn how to do it at home. They will feel they are helping with the meal when they set the table, mix the salad, or practice pouring liquids.

Family meals can also be a time for everyone to talk about what happened during the day, especially their day at school or your day at work. Children learn how to set and clean the table. Children can control how much food they get based on their hunger or fullness.

Children can be involved in the meal prep in several ways:



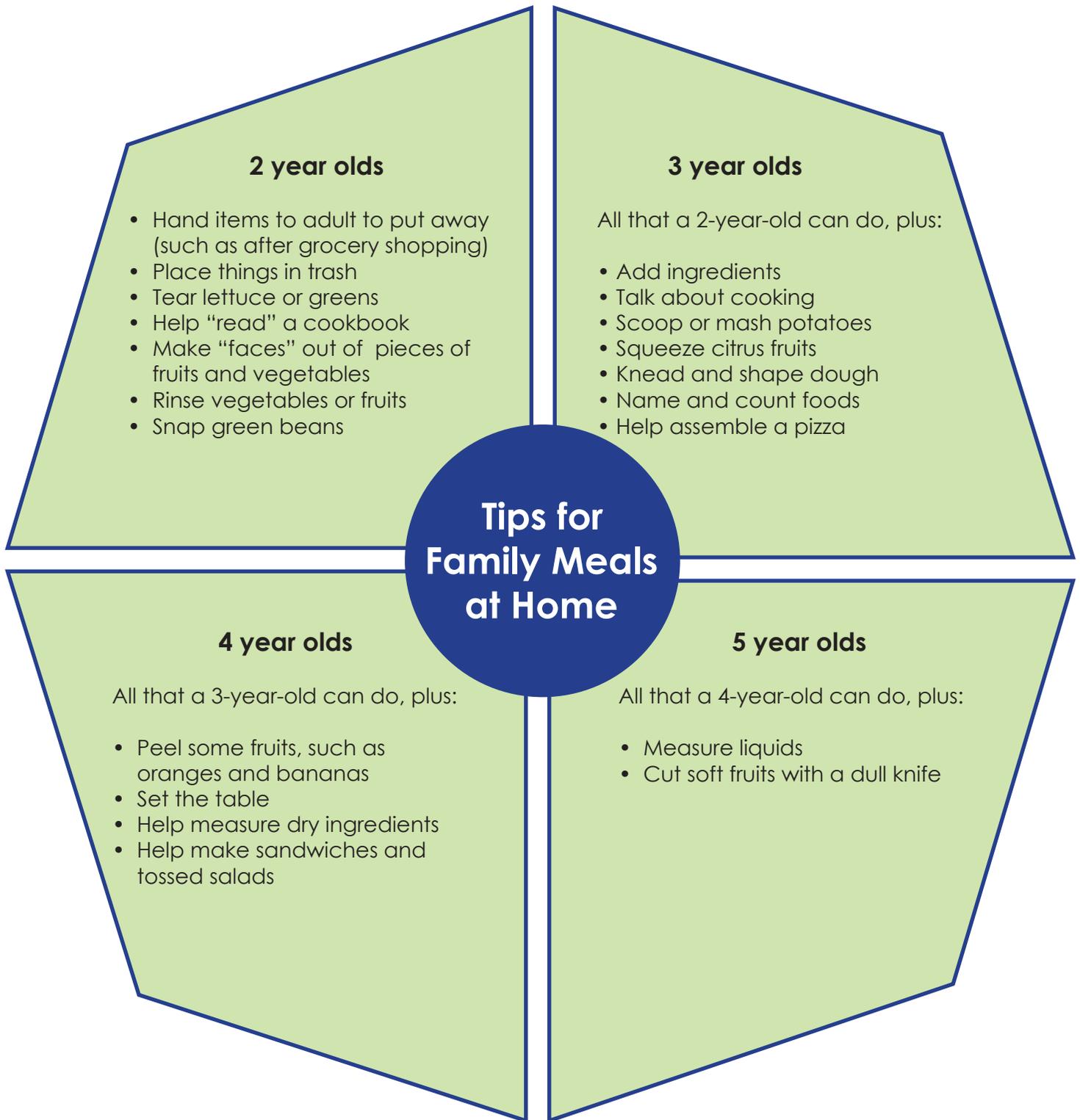
tossing
salad,

stirring items
that are not
hot,

setting the
table,

or putting
items together
the day before
the meal, if
needed.

Have a relaxed meal when sitting at the table. Allow children to talk about the day or whatever they want to talk about. Make mealtime enjoyable by keeping a calm, relaxing atmosphere for everyone.



Benefits of Family Style Meal Service

1. Reinforces social skills:

- taking turns
- passing food in serving dishes to others
- saying please and thank you
- helping to set the tables

2. Strengthens serving skills:

- practicing fine and gross motor skills when serving and passing food
- learning to serve and pass food without touching the food
- learning not to eat out of the serving dishes or off of serving utensils

3. Gives children control of their eating:

- taking small servings of food and take additional helpings throughout the meal
- choosing not to take a food item initially, but change their minds later in the meal or another time the item is served
- feeling confident that additional helpings will be available throughout the meal
- leaving more food for children who are hungrier on any given day

4. Indirectly encourages children to try new foods:

- children who do not feel pressure and who feel in control of their eating are more likely to try new foods
- children may need to see a new food fifteen to twenty times before they want to try it

5. Helps family child care providers be interactive:

- providers act as role models, demonstrating appropriate mealtime behavior
- providers are available at the table to redirect behavior before it gets out of hand

6. Reduces food waste:

- children take only what they want to eat
- children are at ease with getting additional food

References

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