



Mealtime Mentoring

November 2008

Creating Supportive Food Environments

Child care homes and centres have an important role in shaping the eating behaviours of children through the food environment they create.

Parents and caregivers have the most influence on what a young child eats and drinks. Because of this, they have a big role in establishing healthy eating behaviours for children. Be a positive role model. The children in your care may adopt many of your attitudes about food, eating and health.

Part of a healthy feeding relationship is providing the children with regular meals and snacks. Allowing children to eat according to their own feelings of fullness or hunger is also very important. Encourage children to eat when hungry and stop when full.

Caregivers are responsible for when, where and what foods are offered. Children are responsible for if they eat and how much.

In their early years, a child's appetite and food likes and dislikes may change frequently. Therefore, children are the best judges of how much they need to eat.

Establishing good eating habits for a lifetime requires knowledge and skill. Teach the children, by way of conversation, about your menus, shopping and cooking as well as the benefits of healthy eating. You are laying the foundation for good health. Have healthy foods available for the children to practice what they have learned.



Create a calm and pleasant environment for the children to enjoy their meals and snacks.

Give positive recognition for making healthy food choices or positive eating behaviour.

Promote social development and language skills during meals and snacks by encouraging good manners and conversations. Have children talk about their families, their customs and their cultures and feel proud of whom they are. Food is a part of everyone's culture. Children may be alike or they may be different, but certainly, they are all special. They will learn to know and respect each other.

Practical Tips

Allow enough time for meals and snacks

Rushing meals and snacks is frustrating for both you and the children. Do kids seem to dawdle at the table? Young children do not have the skill or muscle development to eat fast. They are developing their fine motor skills. They need time to practice eating with appropriate utensils. Let them eat at a pace that they can enjoy their table time. Allow about 10-15 minutes for a snack and 20-30 minutes for a meal. It takes about 20 minutes for them to start feeling full.



- Rewarding children for a clean plate teaches them to ignore their own body signs and may encourage them to overeat.
- Giving food as a treat to make them feel better teaches a child to overcome a negative feeling by eating. This may lead to overeating later in life.
- If you do fundraising, choose healthy food items or non-food items for selling.
- When choosing rewards, use non-food items such as free play, a story, a craft, a game or stickers for older children.

Be a good role model

Children want to grow up doing what others do. Chances are, if you eat your broccoli, turnips and whole grain buns, the children will try them too – if not now, then in the future. You are a role model for them along with their parents, siblings and friends.

Choose a non-food approach

Reward the children with your attention, kind words and hugs. Show you care for them by having fun together and spending time with them.

- Choose not to reward, appease or punish a child with food. Eating for your approval creates unhealthy beliefs about food and themselves.
- Some comments may lead children to eating problems. These include “eat everything on your plate so you can play” or “stop crying and I’ll give you a candy”. These comments may lead to conflict or struggles between you and the child that are unnecessary.

Create a nurturing place to eat that is ...

... Relaxed

Plan a relaxed atmosphere with appropriate conversation. Focus on the food, mealtime and people they are eating with. Turn off the television.

... Safe

- Stay with young children who are eating, even if you have other things to do.
- Have easy to hold, child sized plates, cups and utensils.
- Have a comfortable, supportive chair (with a back) at the appropriate height for the table.
- For small children, don’t serve hard, small whole foods such as nuts, seeds, candy or popcorn. Slice grapes, carrots and wieners into small strips. Avoid marshmallows.
- Teach the children to chew foods well so they won’t choke when swallowing.
- Spread sticky foods like peanut butter or cheese-spread thinly.

Helping you provide healthy food and a positive eating environment in early learning and child care settings.