

Planning for Meal and Snack Times in Preschool Programs

Nutritious meals and snacks are essential for young children's optimal growth and development. The energy provided by healthy foods ensures that children will be ready to fully participate in the day's learning opportunities. During meals and snacks preschoolers learn how to make nutritious choices, discover a wide variety of different foods and develop healthy eating habits.

Ensuring that each child's daily nutritional needs are met requires that food servings during every meal and snack adhere to all components of the USDA Meal Guidelines for Children Ages 1-12. Programs should supplement any lunches and snacks brought from home, providing additional foods as necessary to make up for any missing USDA Meal Guidelines component. Milk should be a component of each meal. Programs should ask for a physician's note if a family requests that no milk or a milk-based substitute be given to their child.

Programs should be diligent in maintaining a healthy, safe environment for food preparation and eating areas. Staff and children's handwashing requires constant attention. Proper washing and disinfecting procedures should be followed for cleaning tables used for eating, food preparation surfaces and food equipment before and after food use. The recommended procedure for cleaning eating surfaces involves washing tables with a soapy solution, then disinfecting with a bleach/water solution. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for diluting the household bleach. Tables should be dried with disposable paper towels. Staff should always wash their hands after wiping tables and before serving food. Child handwashing before meals consists of washing hands with soap and water, drying hands with a paper towel and going directly to a table.

Families' dietary restrictions due to religious beliefs, personal beliefs, cultural customs and health issues should be respected by the program. Information regarding food allergies should be documented in writing for each affected child and be readily available to all staff involved with the children's meals and snacks. This includes kitchen personnel and substitute instructional staff.

Meal and snack times are also prime opportunities for extending high-quality teaching practices

and child learning outcomes across the curriculum. Teacher modeling, facilitating and thoughtful planning will lead to an atmosphere that encourages children to:

- Practice emerging independence by using child-sized containers and utensils, allowing preschoolers to set tables, pour beverages, serve themselves and clear their places.
- Interact in a pleasant social atmosphere as they participate with peers and adults in decision-making, sharing, communication with others and practicing good manners during family-style mealtime settings.
- Learn healthy habits such as handwashing and tooth-brushing.
- Experience an inclusive classroom setting where accommodations for preschool children with disabilities allows everyone to participate together during meals.
- Develop mathematical understanding by counting, sorting, patterning and practicing one-to-one correspondence facilitated by adults who capitalize on teachable moments during meals and snacks.
- Experience the richness of all cultures through diversity in food and food customs.
- Explore the science of food preparation.
- Enhance literacy development by using new vocabulary and facilitating conversational turn-taking.

Many of these important teaching practices and learning outcomes can only occur in family-style meal settings. Whenever possible, preschoolers should eat their meals in the classroom. Large cafeteria often provided table and seating heights and arrangements that are inappropriate for preschoolers. Opportunities for teachers to extend children's learning are lessened in large, noisy environments.

Meal and snack schedules should ensure that children are offered nutritious food every two to three hours at appropriate times (not too early or too late) during the school day. Food should be offered to children who express hunger when arriving at school after a scheduled mealtime. Emphasizing good nutrition, health, social skills and academic learning during carefully planned meal and snack times helps pave the way for young children's optimal growth and development. The references below may be accessed for further information on any aspect of

this essential preschool program component.

References

American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, and National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education (2002). *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care Programs*, 2nd editions. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics and Washington D.C.: American Public Health Association. Also available at <http://nrc/uchsc.edu>.

Child and Adult Food Care Programs, USDA Food and Nutrition Service at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/child-and-adult-care-food-program>

Cryer, D., Harms, Thelma., Riley, C. (2003). *All About the ECERS-R*. Lewisville, North Carolina: PACT House Publishing. Kaplan Early Learning Company.

New Jersey Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards (2014) at <https://www.nj.gov/education/earlychildhood/preschool/docs/PreschoolTeachingandLearningStandards.pdf>