

FAMILY STYLE MEALS

Rather than considering how to deliver meal service that is easy and efficient for adults, snacks and meals in GSRP are part of the curriculum. Snack and mealtimes provide daily opportunities to demonstrate the program philosophy in a visible way through the practices of participatory learning and authentic conversations that build relationships between children and adults. This document describes quality features of family style meals, where adults and children eat together in the classroom.

Planning

- Plan enough time for meals and snacks. When children assist with set-up, passing and clean-up, expect meals to take 40 - 45 minutes. Snacks will take 15 – 20 minutes.
- Center-based programs must follow guidelines of the Department of Human Services (DHS) Bureau of Children and Adult Licensing:
http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dhs/BCAL-PUB-0008_241660_7.pdf.
- Assure that there is enough food. See the CACFP meal pattern:
http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/care/ProgramBasics/Meals/Meal_Patterns.htm. A sufficient amount of food must be available to provide the full required portions of each of the food components for all children, and to accommodate adult(s).
- Foods served should reflect the home and community cultures and be high in nutrients and low in fat, sugar, and salt.
- Children may have never experienced a meal served family style. Preschoolers love to serve themselves and will easily succeed with some guidance and encouragement. Be prepared to offer intentional support at the start of each school year, with newly-enrolled children and after breaks from school, such as long weekends and holidays. Using real food service materials to set up “meal” provisions in the house area, water table and sand table so that children can practice.

The Eating Environment

- Meals take place in the classroom, away from high traffic areas. Noises and distractions are minimized or eliminated.
- A non-carpeted surface provides for easier clean-up.
- Children have enough space at the table for serving, passing and eating comfortably.
- Serving utensils are child-size with comfortable handles. Small scoops, tongs, and spoons may work best. One-quarter and one-half cup measuring cups with handles are the ideal size and also help control portions. Use small pitchers with handles and pouring spouts for serving beverages. Bowls with wide lips are most easily handled by young children. Plastic serving bowls are light-weight and don't conduct heat.
- Plates, bowls, glasses, cups and eating utensils are child-sized. Consider using plates with limited patterns and designs so that the focus remains on the food. Consider using smaller lunch or salad plates because dinner plates can be difficult for children to handle.
- A gallon ice-cream container or sand-pail, along with cleaning cloths, make fine clean-up materials for child use.

Characteristics of Family Style Meals

- Children assist to prepare for snack or mealtime by assisting with washing and setting tables.
- At the beginning of the meal, children bring food to the table in serving bowls, plates, or baskets that children can use comfortably. There are serving utensils for all food.
- Children choose where they will sit. At least one adult sits at each table where children eat and eat the same foods children do. Adults typically position themselves in a mid-position, to more easily provide support and have rich conversation with all children.
- Food is passed from one person to another.
- Typically, an adult begins passing each food item, modeling with action and words as they serve themselves. For example, "Today we have yellow string beans. I am taking one spoonful of beans and then I'll pass them to my friend Tamilla. Tamilla, here you go! You might want one or two spoonfuls of beans." Adults provide verbal description as they model how to pass bowls and show children how to use two hands while holding a bowl on the outside so that their fingers do not touch the food. Adults model how to pour and scoop using appropriate utensils. Adults model conventional table manners, such as waiting for turns, passing foods and saying "please" and "thank you".
- Children should initially be offered the full required portion of each meal component. This may be accomplished by carefully selecting the serving utensil. For example, a half-cup measure can be used to serve vegetables at lunchtime.
- Rather than acting as servers, adults sit at the tables with children throughout the snack or meal, unless more food is needed from larger or high-temperature containers.
- Everyone serves themselves. Children are encouraged to take a portion of each food component. Family style meal service affords some latitude in the size of initial servings because replenishment is immediately available.
- Adults offer minimal assistance as needed. In the rare instance where one child needs more help than others, the adult can encourage peer support and/or the child can be encouraged to sit near an adult at the start of the meal.
- Children choose whether to eat, what to eat, and how much to eat. Have enough food available to meet meal pattern requirements and to allow for seconds.
- Some food will spill as children serve themselves. Be prepared for this with a nearby pail of soapy water and paper toweling. The adult remains seated as the child (and sometimes peers) is calmly supported to clean up spills, wash hands and return to the meal.
- Adults participate in child-initiated conversation.
- Children help clean-up by clearing their places at the table, disposing of their leftovers, washing the table, and pushing in their own chairs. Be prepared for this with a nearby pail of soapy water and small cloths. Adults do final cleaning/sanitizing after the meal has ended and children have left the table.