

HOW TO: Provide Structure in Early Child Care Settings to Promote Healthy Eating

Childhood is a critical period for the development of eating behaviors and habits that last into adulthood. These habits play a vital role in growth, development, overall health, and the prevention of obesity and other lifelong, diet-related chronic diseases. Emerging research shows that it's not just WHAT we feed our kids that matters, but also HOW we handle feeding or eating that's really important in establishing lifelong healthy habits for our kids.

As an early child care provider, you can shape the structure of the food environment in ways that provide children with abundant opportunities to learn about and have positive experiences with new foods. Maintaining a clear schedule for meal and snack times, making healthy foods and drinks available throughout the day, and modeling healthy eating choices are all key components to building a positive food environment.



Recommended Practices:

Provide a structured food environment:

- ▶ Maintain regular eating times for meals and snacks. Children respond well to routine and a pleasant environment.
- ▶ Always sit at tables with children when eating or drinking.
- ▶ Include children in cleaning such as in setting and clearing the table..



What to serve:

- ▶ Provide the same foods for all children when possible; identify restricted foods based on food allergies and/or cultural food preferences.
- ▶ Use meal times when some children have different food than others as an opportunity to talk about family cultures and food allergies.
- ▶ Make drinking water available at all times including during meals.
- ▶ Make healthy foods and beverages available at planned meal and snack times.
- ▶ If your program is not required to follow CACFP nutrition standards, provide guidance to parents/guardians at enrollment for foods brought from home.

How to serve:

- ▶ Use serving utensils like spoodles and ladles to educate on appropriate portion sizes.
- ▶ All children are served the same amount of food according to CACFP guidelines, with exceptions for children with allergies, vegetarians, and parents that provide their child's meals.
- ▶ Provide repeated exposures to new foods.
- ▶ Be responsive and respect child hunger and fullness cues.
- ▶ Avoid pressuring children to eat and being highly restrictive about specific foods.