

# Child Care plus+

## + Let's Eat—And Learn!

When was the last time you experimented with melted cheese or explored a drop of milk? If you eat lunch with young children, chances are it has not been that long! Mealtimes in a child care or preschool program provide natural opportunities for children to learn about their world. The learning that surrounds a simple snack can become a highlight of their day. Here are three ways to take full advantage of these learning opportunities:

**A. Recognize the Possibilities!** Children learn by being engaged in fun activities. When you actively involve children in preparing, serving, eating, and cleaning up, you are recognizing the learning value of these experiences. Just as you plan a science activity or art project to optimize involvement and learning, you must also plan mealtime. Used wisely, the daily routine of meals and snacks can be rich learning opportunities. What could children learn and practice during mealtime? They could be learning how to:

- give just one napkin to each child
- pour from a pitcher; count peas or orange wedges
- spread peanut butter on a cracker
- use scissor tongs to pick up a sandwich
- identify shapes in a fruit salad
- describe the inside of a kiwi
- take turns with other children

The list is endless. Whether it is a math skill like counting or a social skill like taking turns, children can have amazing and meaningful learning opportunities during meals and snacks.

**B. Plan Carefully!** While it is true that children find interesting things to do during almost any meal, careful planning can ensure that what they do is educational, enjoyable, and relaxing for all. As you plan, think about a delightful meal you enjoyed recently. Use your memories of what made that meal so enjoyable and the following guidelines to recreate that same feeling in the early childhood setting:

- Sit and eat with the children. This is essential so that

you can actively guide children's learning, observe their responses, AND give them a model for behavior at the same time. Eat what the children eat and discover what happens when you actively participate.

- Make a list of what you need. Have all the dishes, serving utensils, and clean up supplies ready so the meal begins and ends smoothly. Use a cart to keep supplies handy.



- Make it easy for each child to actively participate. Use child-sized dishes and serving utensils. Capture their interest and imaginations with the unusual: a one or two-cup liquid measuring cup for the milk pitcher or ice tongs to serve fruit pieces. Shorten the handle of a slotted serving spoon and watch their reactions as they spoon up canned peaches or green beans.

- Get children involved in each step. Handwashing, setting the table, pouring juice, buttering bread, and clearing the table are equally valuable learning experiences.

- Let the children set the pace. Stop watching the clock and give the children whatever time they need to enjoy eating and learning.

**C. Be Ready for Anything!** Children of all ages are interesting mealtime companions. While planning is vital, it is equally important to expect the unexpected. Most likely something will happen during the meal that intrigues or excites the children. These events offer natural learning opportunities. Allow yourself to take advantage of them. Let yourself be pleasantly surprised when the discussion takes a surprising turn. And if a fly joins the group, take advantage! + SAM

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## + IN FOCUS

Imagine you have a child in your program who fidgets a lot during snack time and has trouble staying seated at a meal. An effective way to prevent inappropriate behavior is to provide active ways for children to participate. Here are just a few basic ideas to use with this child.

**Give the child something meaningful to do.** Maybe he or she could be the mealtime helper, responsible for helping set the table as well as clearing it at the end of the meal. Encourage him to use the tongs to pick up a sandwich, to pour his own milk, to make his own cheese and cracker snack.

**See the fun in meal times.** Engage the child in conversation by commenting on what you observe.

**Add something different.** Just for fun, do something silly! Wear your gloves to the table, start to serve the food without the plates being out yet, or sing as you supervise the setting of the table. See how the child reacts to what you are doing, then build on his reaction. You will be amazed at the conversations that can result from a surprise.

**Let the child decide when he is done.** Let the child leave the table when he or she chooses to be done, and encourage him or her to move on to another activity.

When meal time is fun and interesting, children will look forward to that time with great anticipation! + KM



"more"

## + TRY IT OUT

Providing a way for children to take charge of cleaning up after snacks and meals helps them develop a sense of ownership and belonging as they help take care of their environment. To create a "clean-up station," use these materials, and organize them in this order:

| Materials   | Use   |
|---|---|
| Low, waterproof table                               | Children can complete tasks without reaching above their waists.  |
| Plastic tub #1                                      | Children place their cups (empty or partially full) in this tub   |
| Low garbage can with an easy lid                    | Children use utensils to scrape "left-overs" into the garbage can.                                      |
| Plastic tub #2                                      | Scraped dishes and eating utensils are collected in this tub.   |
| Spray bottles with bleach solution and paper towels | Children who wish to may return and clean the meal table. *1 Tbs bleach to 1 quart water, changed daily |
| Mops, brooms and dust pans                          | Children can take charge of floor clean-up too when needed.   |

Position the station so clean-up naturally leads children in the direction of their handwashing location. Demonstrate the steps of clean-up, and express confidence in their ability and desire to help take care of "our" program. Allow enough time for children to move through the process at their own pace as they learn the skills of carrying, scraping, and sorting. Let yourself relax and enjoy supporting this learning process! + SHW

## + CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Parents are probably already including their children at mealtime in ways that promote learning—they just may not realize it! One of the important things you can do as an early childhood professional is to help parents see the potential in this natural learning opportunity. You can encourage parents to include children in meal time routines and share with parents what you know about how this involvement helps children develop lifelong skills and promote strong social relationships.

More specifically, you can help parents find ways to: \* plan dinner menus together and make lists of what is needed with their child—a genuine occasion to demonstrate the importance of reading and writing in everyday activities; \* let their child help prepare a meal—lots of opportunities for measuring, counting, reading, timing; \* set the table—a natural opportunity for a child to practice counting and organizing; and \* empty the dishwasher or dish drainer—a fun and meaningful chance to sort and gain a sense of accomplishment.

The list of possibilities could go on and on. You are in a position to encourage and congratulate—as well as learn from—parents who take advantage of the natural learning opportunities presented by ordinary routines, such as meal times. The often small but magical moments related to mealtime can spark meaningful conversations, strengthen relationships, and foster a sense of community within the family. + CJ

## + PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

As you know, children are *always* learning—through planned and unplanned daily events in your program. Shared mealtimes are a good example of an everyday early childhood routine that provides children with a wealth of meaningful learning opportunities. You can make mealtime learning experiences even more effective when you apply *natural teaching* practices.

**NATURAL TEACHING:** Natural teaching (also referred to as “taking advantage of teachable moments”) occurs when 1) children are engaged in planned or unplanned activities that are meaningful to them AND 2) the teacher/caregiver initiates brief interactions designed to build on children’s knowledge, skills, or dispositions as a part of the activity.

Natural teaching is an effective tool when children are indicating *readiness* for new or more information—readiness applies both to their development and their openness to your input. Children indicate readiness by asking questions and/or by making repeated attempts to master a new skill.

**NATURAL TEACHING AT MEALTIME:** Natural teaching during snacks and mealtimes begins when you not only join the group for the meal but when you actively pay attention to the children and what they are saying and doing. Paying attention includes your following the topics of conversation, listening to comments and questions, and observing children’s interactions with each other, the food and serving utensils, and the whole process. Natural teaching occurs when you use what you discover to build upon the children’s experiences by offering a “logical next level” of exploration or learning.

**EFFECTIVE MEALTIME TEACHING:** The good news about natural teaching is that you probably use it already—most adults use this teaching method quite naturally! Even children use this strategy with one another. For example, after one child reports that corn is “my favorite,” it would not be uncommon for a second child to respond with his or her knowledge about corn: *Corn grows in my garden. It grows taller than me. You have to give it water.* You can build on the effectiveness of the natural teaching you use at mealtimes by using the following techniques:

**Open-ended conversations:** Engage children in open-ended conversations (*I’d like to hear more about the vegetables that grow in your garden . . .*) rather than using conversation to direct or correct their thinking. Open-ended conversations help you understand children’s thinking, builds their confidence, and allows you to offer new information (*You know something important about corn—it needs water to grow. I wonder what else it needs . . .*)

**Coaching:** Coaching means helping the child take “a next step” while allowing the child to stay in control of the learning process. One example would be responding to a child’s offer to carry a large bowl to the lunch table by first demonstrating how to hold the bowl with both hands—helping the child learn and successfully practice a new skill.

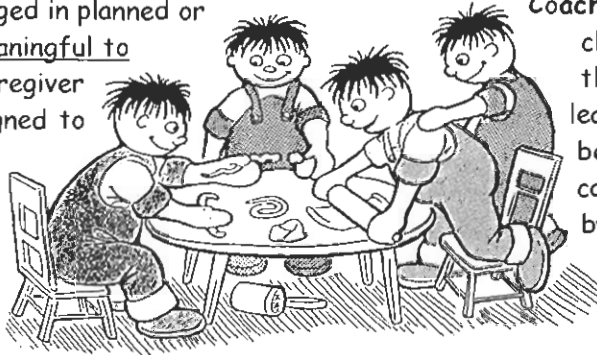
**Modeling:** When you hear or see children display readiness for a concept or idea, you can naturally take learning to the next level by extending what they have done by modeling, such as *Thank you for counting the spoons (up to 4) to make sure we had enough. I better count the cups, too (up to 6).*

**MEALTIME TEACHING PRECAUTIONS:** If misused or overused, natural teaching during meals can have negative outcomes including:

- ▶ creating artificial adult/child interactions by turning every event into “teaching,” overtaking the importance of genuine personal connections.
- ▶ producing tension in children by hovering to correct or modify their efforts.
- ▶ reducing children’s interactions with one another.
- ▶ interrupting children who are already engaged in meaningful conversations or exploration that allows them to *construct their own knowledge*.

Learning occurs continuously in your program—in ways that reach far beyond your planned curriculum. In addition to providing nutritious food, you can use meal and snack times to offer a “smorgasbord” of child-centered learning experiences!

+ SHW



## + QUESTION

**QUESTION:** *Our schedule is pretty full and we don't always have time to take advantage of natural learning opportunities. Can we have our teachers use these techniques some—but not all—of the time?*

**ANSWER:** Basically, guiding children's learning is the most important task of an early childhood educator—more important than arranging nap mats or cleaning up snack. Whenever children are eager and ready to learn, you have to take advantage! Yes, it may take more time for eating when you sit with the children, participate in good conversation, and promote their engagement in learning. So instead of thinking about the time it takes, think of what is happening during this time. If you value the learning, it is easier to justify the time.

Essentially, time is an adult concept anyway. Children don't care if an activity takes 20 minutes or 45 minutes, they care about whether the activity is fun and interesting. Instead of thinking about time, look at your daily schedule and create a predictable, yet flexible order. Children need the reassurance of a predictable routine so that they know what will happen next, but they also need the flexibility to take a longer (or shorter) time to complete both planned and spontaneous activities. Your role is to guide the children through the daily schedule at a pace that is primarily responsive to their interests.

While it is true that some mealtimes may take longer, others may take less time than usual. The trick is to adjust the way you think about your schedule so that you can guide children's learning by taking advantage of the *natural* learning opportunities that occur throughout the entire day. The main idea is to keep children meaningfully

engaged. Every routine and every activity—planned or not—has the potential to be a great opportunity to learn. Sometimes a grilled cheese sandwich is more educational than the art activity you had planned. You may find that you plan fewer activities throughout the day so that the children have time to learn when those unplanned opportunities occur. + SAM

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

Child Care plus+ has produced a 22-page booklet called *Let's Eat: Using Family-Style Meals in Early Childhood Programs*. This booklet includes practical strategies designed to provide a framework for creativity and learning at meal and snack times in early childhood programs. Provides examples and techniques for use with young children in programs of all sizes. This booklet is available until July 15, 2002 for only \$6.00 (after July 15<sup>th</sup>, it will be offered at \$10.00). To receive a booklet, send \$6.00 US funds to Child Care plus+ at the address in the box below.

*CHILD CARE plus+* is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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