

Focused Topics

Essentials in Child Care Food Service

Family-Style Dining in Child Care Settings

Healthy lifestyle attitudes begin in the early years. As a food service worker, you play an important role in helping children develop healthy eating habits, from the menus you create to the dishes you serve. Children rely on you to offer healthy food choices and model healthy lifestyles. Understanding what to eat and how much to eat are important skills for young children to learn. Family-style dining offers the opportunity for children to learn how to choose healthy foods in age-appropriate portions, as well as the social skills used during dining.

Objectives

- Define family-style dining and name three benefits of this type of meal service.
- List examples of equipment that support family-style dining.
- Explain why portion control is important and how family-style dining promotes portion control.
- Identify foods that are choking hazards and how to minimize the risk of choking.



Learn



Know

Overview of Family-Style Dining

Most programs use the *family-style dining* model to serve meals to the children at their center. Family-style dining is considered a best practice when eating with children of all ages in child care settings. It involves sitting at the same table with young children, in small groups, with the children serving themselves when possible, and eating together with adults while sharing pleasant conversations. People pass food to one another from serving dishes. It is different from *cafeteria-style dining*, in which children wait in line and are given single servings of food. Being familiar with family-style dining practices can help food service staff plan for and prepare meals that are congruent with this meal style.

There is plenty of research to support the benefits of family-style dining. The Institute of Medicine's 2011 Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Policies cites family-style dining as a way for child care providers to practice "responsive feeding," which includes letting children serve themselves and having adults sit and eat with children to model eating, give guidance on serving sizes, and listen to hunger and fullness cues. Children who participate in family-style dining are more attuned to their natural hunger and satiety cues, are more likely to try new foods, and are more likely to make healthier choices when seeing these choices modeled for them.



Participating in family-style dining with young children includes many benefits, it:

- Promotes social skills. Children learn to say, "please" and "thank you." They learn to ask for what they need, wait patiently, and take turns.
- Prevents behaviors that increase the possibility of arguments, taking someone else's food, stuffing food into the mouth, potential choking, and playing with food.
- Promotes language and vocabulary development. Children learn the names of new foods, and adults can model complex language around the size, color, texture, taste, and smell of foods. Meals are also a natural time for conversations about interests and ideas.
- Models manners and how to use utensils.
- Establishes warm relationships between children and their peers.
- Promotes hand-eye coordination as children handle dishes and utensils.

- Promotes decision-making and problem-solving as children decide what to eat and how much to eat and how to express their wants and needs.
- Allows children to see adults making healthy choices. This is an excellent opportunity to model these important lifelong behaviors.

Family-style dining has a special look and feel. It should allow caregivers and children to relax, enjoy the meal, and enjoy each other's company. However, family-style dining does not happen without challenges. Toddlers might spill their drinks, drop their forks, fidget in their seats, and squabble with peers. However, these behaviors are common in early childhood as children gain a greater sense of independence and mastery of their physical skills. You can read more about family-style dining in the attachment below, *Benefits and Steps for Family-Style Dining*.

◆ [Benefits and Steps for Family-Style Dining](#)

Proper documentation of feeding is essential. Information should be shared daily between children's homes and the program so families and direct care staff know when the child last ate, and therefore know when they may be hungry again. As a food service employee, be prepared to assist program staff as they track what children eat during family-style dining.

Implementing Family-Style Dining

There are several important considerations for implementing family-style dining in your facility. Knowing what to expect from the food service vantage point will allow you to incorporate family-style dining as part of your child care program's food service.

Organizing a Food Budget

Creating a food budget for family-style is not that different from the budget process for traditional food service. Your budget should record quantity of food purchased and served, which can help reduce food waste and save your facility money over time.

According to Nemours and Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Association (OCCRRA) Family Style Dining Guide, the following strategies help with budgeting in a family-style dining environment:

- Use seasonal fresh foods
- Inquire with a food supplier about the variety of healthy foods they may be selling
- Align menu cycle to food supplier sale schedule
- Calculate number of servings needed by age for each meal or snack
- Account for second helpings, spills and contaminated food
- Add-in number of adults receiving a child-size portion

- Record number of portions served and left over

Identifying Equipment Needs

There is no special equipment required to implement family-style dining. That said, using equipment such as serving utensils, plates, bowls, cups, spoons, etc., which are designed specifically for children's smaller hands and developmental abilities, will allow for a more successful family-style dining experience and result in less food waste or spills. Talk to direct care staff in your program to help determine how well children may be able to use serving items. Also, make sure that the serving dishes are not hot when the children pick them up, particularly with metal bowls.

Examples of equipment designed for young children include:

- **Wide-rimmed plates and bowls for serving.** These are easier for children to grip and pass. Alternatively, you can serve directly from child-size eating dishes. One advantage of using a few small serving dishes is that if the food being served should become contaminated (for example, if a child uses their own spoon instead of a serving spoon) it can be removed without disrupting meal service or wasting a large amount of food.
- **Short-handled serving spoons, scoops, and measuring cups.** These fit more easily into a child's hand, are not as heavy, and make it easier for a child to scoop, carry, and pour food onto plates. Be sure to use the proper size serving utensil for each food being served. For example, if each child should receive a ½ cup of carrots, use a ½ cup capacity serving utensil, which helps ensure that the child is receiving the proper portion of that food.
- **Pitchers in different sizes.** This will help accommodate the various age levels of children at the child care facility. For example, toddlers may need to use a small pitcher for pouring, while preschoolers may be more skilled at using a larger child-size pitcher.
- **Drinking cups marked with a visual cue, such as a line.** The line shows children know when to stop pouring beverages. The line can be drawn on with permanent marker to show the fill line for the appropriate beverage serving size. Plastic drinking cups in 4 to 8 oz. size are suitable for young children and won't break if dropped.
- **Clear plastic squeeze bottles for condiments.** Smaller-sized bottles are lighter in weight than larger-sized bottles, and are easier to hold and squeeze. Clear squeeze bottles allow children see the contents so they aren't dependent on adults to tell them what is inside. Label the bottles to support literacy development. Including pictures along with the words is beneficial.



Another benefit of the family style dining model is the opportunity for children to learn responsibilities. For instance, children can develop independence and responsibility by helping with after-meal cleanup. Giving children the opportunity to clean up spills allows them to learn that mistakes are OK and can be corrected. Keep child-size cleaning supplies, such as a child-size broom and dustpan, paper towels, and trash cans nearby so that children can access them in case they need to assist with cleanup.

Setting Up the Dining Room

For meals that are served in a classroom eating area or central dining area, such as for some school-age programs, you can arrange the area in a manner that makes it more conducive to serving meals family-style. The following is a list of tips from the *Family Style Dining Guide* for arranging the dining room to accommodate family-style dining.

BEFORE Meals

- Set out items such as napkins, plates, forks, spoons, and drinking cups for children to help set the table.
- Provide multiple sets of child-size serving utensils in case of contamination.
- Fill several small dishes of the same food, making sure to limit the number of portions in each dish.

- Place a sufficient number of portions of all foods being served on each table.
- Reserve extra servings of each food in the kitchen, in case of contamination or for second helpings.
- Fill pitchers partially to reduce spills.

AFTER Meals

- Provide child-size items to help clean up spills, such as short-handle brooms and dustpans.
- Provide a container where children can put their used dishes, drinking cups, and utensils.
- Provide trash cans for children to dispose of napkins or uneaten food.

The classroom eating area or cafeteria should be outfitted with tables and chairs appropriate for a child's size. For example, children's feet should touch the floor when seated, with their arms resting comfortably on the table top. This promotes a greater degree of comfort and allows children to focus on eating, relaxing, and socially interacting with their peers.



Portion Control

Encouraging portion control in family-style dining can be challenging. The hallmark of family-style dining is that children make choices about what they eat. For young children, such as those in the 12–18 month age range, the direct care staff might need to provide active guidance or assistance when serving meals in the family-style dining format, while older children can do this more independently. There are bound to be times when children take too much or too little or spill or refuse a particular food. This is part of the process, and the adults helping serve the meal should respond patiently.



Consider that a child's stomach is about the size of his or her fist as a guide in helping to determine portion sizes children should serve themselves at mealtimes. As a food service staff, you can help ensure portion control by following these tips:

- Use child-sized pitchers, serving dishes, and serving utensils for meals.
- Limit waste by only putting a portion of available food in the serving dishes; but ensuring that there is at least one portion per child; refill as needed.
- Use child-size plates, bowls, and cups; this will help children limit themselves to healthy portions.
- Remember that a child's appetite and taste can change over time; growth spurts happen throughout childhood, and this affects how hungry a child can be. It is normal for young children to consume a lot one day and then eat considerably less the next day.
- When filling the serving dishes, provide enough so that children may have second helpings of nutritious foods.

Choosing How Much to Eat

It is important to consider how much food a person should eat. With obesity on the rise, portion control is an essential skill to teach children, even from a young age. Family-style dining gives children the opportunity to choose how much they serve themselves and to see what recommended portion sizes look like. Preschool-

age children need approximately 1,200 calories per day, while school-age children need approximately 1,200 to 1,600 calories per day, depending on their level of physical activity. Foods should be split among the five food groups on MyPlate. MyPlate is a visual tool that shows the five food groups and the relative amounts of each group to include in a balanced meal. Below are links to MyPlate Daily Checklists for children of various ages. These checklists are based on the MyPlate guidelines and show how much food from each of the five food groups growing children need. More information about MyPlate can be found in an accompanying lesson in this module.

- ◆ [MyPlate Daily Checklist for Children Age 2-3 Years](#)
- ◆ [MyPlate Daily Checklist for Children Age 4-8 Years](#)
- ◆ [MyPlate Daily Checklist for Children Age 9-13 Years](#)

Note also that parent resources about nutrition are widely available, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Nutrition Service with the families in your program, such as Nibbles for Health: Nutrition Newsletters for Parents of Young Children at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nibbles>.

Choking Hazards

Your program's direct care staff are responsible for ensuring that all food young children come into contact with is not a potential choking hazard. Choking happens quickly and silently. The general rule is that foods that are safe to eat are not round, hard, small, thick, sticky, smooth, or slippery. For a list of choking hazards and tips to reduce choking incidents, see the [Reducing Choking Risks](#) fact sheet in the Apply section of the Infant & Toddler track of the Healthy Environments course, Lesson Five. Infants and toddlers should never be left unattended while eating. Make sure that the child's caregiver is within an arm's reach and in sight of infants and toddlers at all times during mealtime. Food service staff can help reduce the risk of choking by making sure foods served to each age group are presented in textures appropriate for that age group, that food has been cut into small pieces, and that foods considered to be high risk for choking are not served to young children.



What Does a Program that Employs Family-Style Dining Look Like?

Family-style dining is one way child care programs can promote healthy eating and social habits. Watch the following video to see examples of high-quality family-style dining for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Do you use these techniques in your facility? How does your work in the program support these quality interactions?

What Do Healthy Portions Look Like?

Serving appropriate portions is important to ensure that a child's nutritional needs are being met but not exceeded. Review the following resources below from eXtension that show preschool-appropriate portions for each of the five MyPlate food groups, as well as examples for meals and snacks.

◆ [Healthy Portions for Preschoolers in Each Food Group](#)

◆ [More Examples of Healthy Portions for Preschoolers](#)

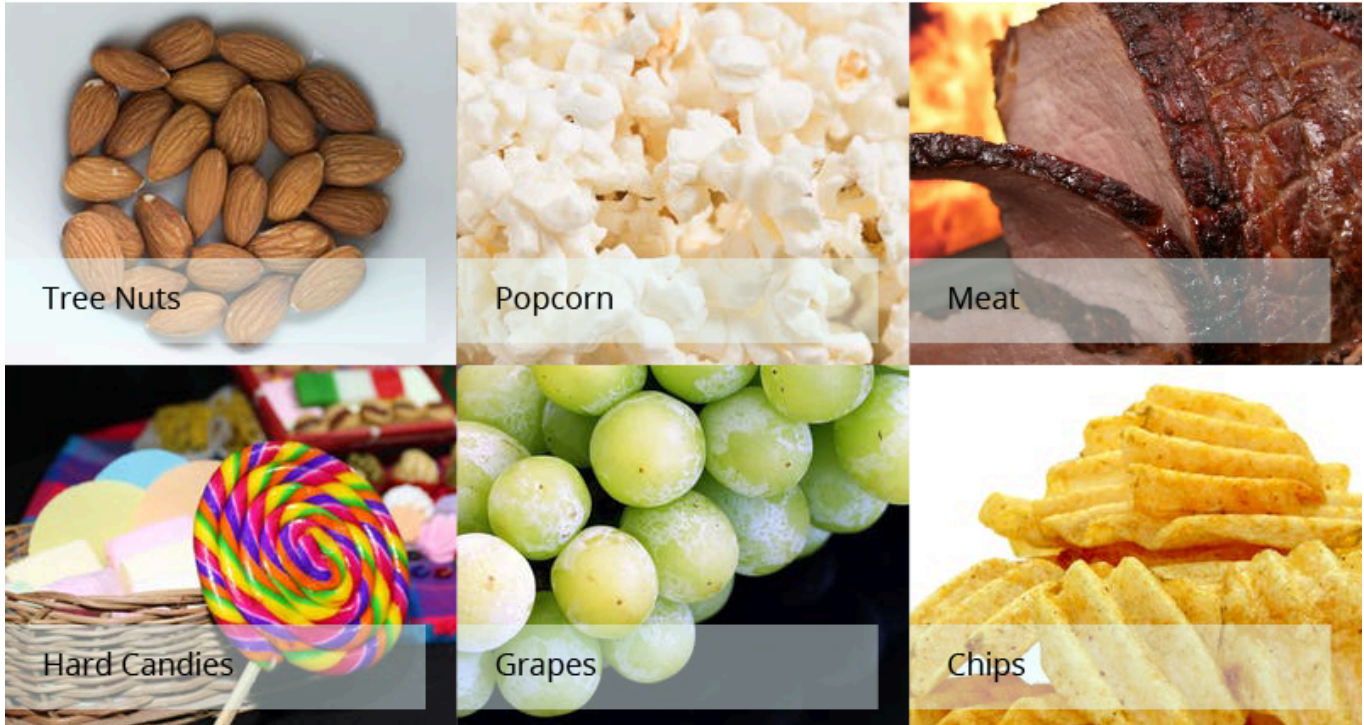


Safety Considerations for Meals

Safety is very important during meal times. The risk of choking is high, and although requiring children to sit while eating minimizes the risk, it cannot be completely eliminated. Certain foods are known choking hazards. For example, children under 4 years old should not be given:

- Hot dogs (whole or sliced into rounds)
- Whole grapes
- Raw carrot rounds
- Hard candy
- Nuts, seeds
- Hard pretzels, chips, peanuts, or popcorn
- Rice cakes
- Marshmallows
- Spoonfuls of any nut butter
- Chunks of meat larger than what can be swallowed whole

Choking Hazards



Regardless of the child's age, watch to make sure they take reasonable-sized bites. Even older children are at risk for choking. Intervene if a child stuffs their mouth or takes an overly large bite. Infants and toddlers need to have their food cut into bite-size pieces that are appropriate for their age. Preschool children can typically cut or break apart their own food, but be prepared to assist a child if needed. It is helpful to serve foods at mealtime that do not increase the risk of choking. Take the following actions to help prevent choking in your program:

- When preparing food, cut into pieces no larger than one-quarter inch, and remind children to chew their food well.
- Serve cooked, thinly sliced or smaller cut portions of meat instead of hot dogs.
- Cut meat and chicken across the grain into small pieces (one-quarter inch or smaller).
- Slice grapes, cherry tomatoes, hot dogs and sausages, and other round foods in half lengthwise and then into quarters. Pieces should not be larger than one-quarter inch.
- Cook carrots or celery sticks until slightly soft, grate them, or cut them into small pieces or thin "matchsticks."
- Spread nut butters, if served at your program, thinly on bread or crackers. A thick "glob" of any nut butter can cause choking.
- Remove all bones from fish, chicken, and meat before cooking.
- Remove seeds and pits from fruit.

- If children dine in a classroom eating area or cafeteria, as with some school-age programs, have children eat at the table while seated. Do not let children run, walk, play, or lie down with food in their mouths. Assist direct care staff by keeping a watchful eye on children during mealtime.

Portion Facts

Portion control is a big factor in healthy eating. Teach school-age children about proper portion control by sharing information on serving sizes and appropriate portions. Use the MyPlate system as a guide and create actual-size place mats showing portions to help determine how much food is the right amount. Use MyPlate-related resources, such as posters or other colorful print materials, in your facility to help reinforce healthy eating patterns.



Benefits and Steps for Family-Style Dining

Understand why family-style dining benefits children's developmental trajectory



MyPlate Daily Checklist: Find your Healthy Eating Style - 1200 calories

Find your healthy eating style with a 1200 daily calorie pattern



MyPlate Daily Checklist Find your Healthy Eating Style - 1400 calories

Find your healthy eating style with a 1400 daily calorie pattern



MyPlate Daily Checklist Find your Healthy Eating Style - 1600 calories

Find your healthy eating style with a 1600 daily calorie pattern



Healthy Portions for Preschoolers in Each Food Group

Use this handy visual guide to better understand required daily portions - arranged by food groups



More Examples of Healthy Preschooler Meal and Snack Portions

Eight more handy visual portion guides - arranged by meal type including breakfast, lunch and snack



Explore

Nemours and the Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Association developed a toolkit for family-style dining in child care centers. This comprehensive document addresses family-style dining from multiple perspectives, including food service staff, direct care staff, and parents. Use the *Family Style Dining Guide: A Mealtime Approach for Early Care and Education Programs* along with the *Equipment Guide* located on pages 42-43 at <https://cdn.occrpa.org/documents/fsd.pdf>. Use the *Equipment Guide* pages to go through your facility's kitchen and check off the type of equipment you already have on hand. Make a note of equipment you need to order and discuss with your supervisor.



Family-Style Dining Guide: A Mealtime Approach for Early Care and Education Programs

Use this comprehensive tool kit in your program



Apply

Double check for choking hazards in meal and snack food items served to children. Just as posting the correct procedures for handwashing and taking food temperatures reminds staff of the necessary steps required to keep everyone healthy from a food safety standpoint, the same is true for posting information on choking hazards. Post copies of the American Academy of Pediatrics Choking Hazards fact sheet so that all food service personnel in your facility are aware of choking risks during meal times. Make copies of the *Reducing Choking Risks* fact sheet for all of the food service staff in your facility.



American Academy of Pediatrics' Choking Hazards fact sheet

Be aware of choking hazards for children under 4



Reducing Choking Risks Fact Sheet

Follow these tips to reduce risks of choking

GLOSSARY

Family-style dining:

a style of food service in which adults and children eat from a shared supply of food, are responsible for the size of their own portions, and talk together at a shared table

Cafeteria-style dining:

a style of food service in which children choose their food (or are given predetermined food) in a serving line



Demonstrate

Q1 True or false? During family-style dining, it is best for adults to serve children, because children do not know how much to serve themselves.*

- True
- False

Q2 Which option is not a benefit of family-style dining?*

- Development of social skills; children learn to ask for what they need, wait patiently, take turns and use polite terms like “please” and “thank you.”
Promotion of language and vocabulary development; meals are a natural time for
- conversations about interests and ideas. During mealtime, adults have many opportunities to model complex language around the size, color, texture, taste, and smell of foods.
Promotion of decision-making and problem-solving skills; as children serve themselves in a
- family-style dining environment, they can decide what to eat, how much to eat and how to express their wants and needs.
- None of the above.

Q3 Choking happens quickly and silently. The general rule is that foods that are safe to eat are:*

- not* round, hard, or small.
 - not* round, hard, small, or thick.
 - not* wet and pureed.
 - not* round, hard, small, thick, sticky, smooth, or slippery.
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References & Resources

- Community for Child Care Council of Santa Clara County, Inc. (2018). Overview, Child Care Food Program.
- Lifsey, S. (2015). Pass the peas, please: The benefits of family-style meals. *Altarum: Solutions that Matter. Health Care that Works*.
- National CACFP Association. (n.d.). Why you should serve family style. Washington, D.C.: Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/video/attachments/family-style-dining-tips.pdf>
- Nemours, & Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Association (2016). Family Style Dining Guide: A mealtime approach for early care and education programs. Retrieved from <https://cdn.occrra.org/documents/fsd.pdf>
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