



Preschools SHINE Fact Sheet

Criteria for Element 3: Mealtime Environment

- Serve meals and snacks *family style*.
- Staff members sit with children, model healthy eating, and eat the same meal that the children eat.
- Children have adequate time to eat a meal or snack.
- Staff members practice Ellyn Satter’s “Division of Responsibility in Feeding” principles.

Family-style meal service is preferred in child care settings. Family-style mealtimes allow children and adults to enjoy a meal or snack together. At the table, children eat familiar and favorite foods; experiment with tasting new foods, flavors, and textures; exchange conversation; build motor skills; and learn how to regulate food intake. With adults seated at the table, mealtimes become an important teaching opportunity. Follow the practices below to meet the criteria for Element 3.

Create a Healthy Mealtime Environment

- Provide adequate space and clean, pleasant surroundings.
- Provide adequate eating and serving utensils that are easily handled by young children.
- Place all the CACFP meal components on the table, where children serve themselves from common dishes of food.
- Cut food into bite-size pieces, when appropriate, to make food manageable for children to eat. Support young children’s emerging eating skills and provide assistance when necessary.
- Ensure that children who need help are seated near an adult.
- Be a role model for healthy eating.
- Provide encouragement and make positive comments about the meals and snacks served.
- Avoid the expression of negative remarks or body language.
- Teach social skills and practice good table manners.
- Handle children’s challenging behaviors with patience and sensitivity.
- Talk about nutrition and the food that everyone is enjoying together.

To learn how to make mealtimes successful at the program site, watch the video *Making Family Style Dining Work*

(<http://www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org/home/resources/success/jcc.html>)



Establish Mealtime Policies

Does the site have mealtime policies? Written mealtime policies will make teachers and family child care providers aware of mealtime expectations. For sample mealtime policies and ideas to develop your own policies, refer to the fact sheet on Element 8: Wellness Policies.

Allow Sufficient Time to Eat Meals and Snacks

Provide adequate time to eat meals and snacks. Mealtimes should not feel hurried. Good judgment is needed. Generally, 20–30 minutes is enough time for children to enjoy a meal; however, adjust time according to the needs of the children.

Follow Ellyn Satter’s Division of Responsibility in Feeding

Ellyn Satter’s “Division of Responsibility in Feeding” principles <http://ellynsatterinstitute.org/dor/divisionofresponsibilityinfeeding.php> advocate division of responsibility between children and adults.

- Adults have the responsibility of providing healthy and safe food served at regularly scheduled times in a pleasant environment.
- Children have the responsibility of deciding whether, what, and how much to eat.

Help Children Determine Hunger and Fullness

- Encourage appropriate portion sizes for small children’s stomachs.
- Allow children to serve themselves with small portions, and ask children if they are hungry before offering a second helping.
- Help children recognize their internal hunger and fullness cues so they are able to self-regulate their food intake and respond when they are full. For example, ask children if their tummy is still hungry.
- Adults should model fullness (for example, stop eating when they are full) even when food remains on the plate.

Avoid Behaviors that Interfere with Healthy Mealtime Environment

- Children should not be required to eat everything on their plates or be praised when they finish their food or clean their plates. This may lead to overeating and childhood obesity.
- Children should not be disciplined or scolded during mealtime.
- Adults should not use food as a reward or punishment.
- Differences or preferences for food between children should not be compared.
- A child’s body size or shape should not be discussed.
- Screen time viewing during meals and snacks should not be allowed.