

Transitioning from Family Style Service to Plated Meal Service: Maintaining Responsive Feeding and Responsive Eating in Child Care during COVID19 Pandemic

Responsive feeding means staff offer healthful food and trust each child to eat according to their body's cues of hunger and satisfaction.

Responsive eating means children act on their feelings of hunger and satisfaction. They choose how much and whether to eat food made available by adults.

Family style meal service is an evidence-based practice to support responsive feeding and eating. Children control what food and amount of food they serve themselves from common bowls and pitchers. They eat to meet hunger and satisfaction. Adults avoid pressuring children to take and eat more food, less food, or to eat a specific food.

Plated meal service means food is placed on children's plates and liquid is pre-poured. Plates and cups may be pre-filled in a kitchen, served cafeteria style by staff, or served directly to plates and cups by staff at tableside. Responsive feeding concepts can be applied to plated meal service.

*Guidance from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention **paused family-style meal service for child care programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic.** The CDC guidance for food preparation and meal service below is available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>*

"Food Preparation and Meal Service

- If a cafeteria or group dining room is typically used, serve meals in classrooms instead. If meals are typically served family-style, plate each child's meal to serve it so that multiple children are not using the same serving utensils.
- Food preparation should not be done by the same staff who diaper children.
- Sinks used for food preparation should not be used for any other purposes.
- Caregivers should ensure children wash hands prior to and immediately after eating.
- Caregivers should wash their hands before preparing food and after helping children to eat."

RESPONSIVE FEEDING PRACTICES FOR MEALTIMES WITH PLATED MEAL SERVICE

Preparation for transition to plated meal service will ease the way to relaxed mealtimes where children's hunger and nutrition needs are satisfied.

Family Communication

Inform families about the temporary change from family style meal service to plated service. Points to communicate are:

- Explain that due to COVID 19 pandemic, temporarily, children will not serve themselves at mealtimes. Describe how food will be served. Explain that the change will reduce children's sharing of utensils, bowls, and cups. Explain the change is to help children stay well during the COVID Pandemic.
- Address handwashing and sanitation strategies for plated mealtimes.
- Explain how staff will prepare children for plated meals and how they will support new routines with them.
- Encourage families to give children opportunities to serve themselves at home.
- Communicate daily about how their child responds to plated mealtimes.

Staff Planning and Preparation

- Prepare for quality mealtimes, thinking safety and organization.
- Plan for and increase oversight of handwashing before meals that fit arrival of plated food. Increase supervision of handwashing after meals, and during meals when needed.
- Address staff ratios and schedules so that one adult is ready to sit as the first children begin eating.
- Assure staff sit down as quickly as possible to engage children with assurance and support. Staff will model getting a plate of food and eating all components of food on the plate.
- During first weeks of transition, offer food children know and enjoy. Avoid introducing unfamiliar foods.
- Make plans for children who are still hungry after eating a first serving. Decide if and how second helpings will be served. (Hint: Asking for more does not mean a child wants a full serving. When serving seconds, put a bit on the plate and add more as a child directs.)
- Assure staff agree with plans and will be ready to implement routines for arrival and clearing of food.
- Ensure staff avoid side talk among adults about the food or how it is presented. Children hear those comments. Such comments can unnecessarily alarm or pressure children to eat or not to eat.

Preparing and Supporting Children

1. Prepare children for plated mealtimes. Use meal times and group times to discuss plated meals.
 - Be cautious about giving too much information about "germs." A simple explanation: "We're doing something new at lunch. We will each have our own plate and cup. We will not share bowls and pitchers. *(Note: an underlying point for staff and families is expectation that family style dining will return after the pandemic is controlled. It is unwise to portray family style dining as an unsafe practice to the children or families.)*
 - Explain that food will be placed on their plates and drinks poured.

- Explain what it will be like at the table (i.e., there will be a plate of food for each person; there will not be serving bowls or pitchers or serving utensils on the table; and, each child will have their own spoon, fork, and knife.)
 - Explain where the food is prepared.
 - Explain who puts food on their plates and where that happens.
 - If food is totally pre-plated, assure children that each child will get the same amount of each food. Tell them they can decide how much they eat of each food.
 - If second helpings will be available, explain that there is enough food for everyone.
 - If food will be served by adults at tableside from bowls and pitcher, or served cafeteria style, and if children have a choice of what and how much goes on their plates, explain how that will work. Tell children they can choose what foods they want and how much they want, just as they did when they served themselves from bowls and pitchers.
 - If additional mealtime routines are coming, explain those briefly. Repeatedly explain those routines before mealtimes, during mealtimes, and at the end of mealtimes.
2. Children’s emerging skills for making choices and judging amounts might be especially challenged. Anticipate that some children will show emotional reactions when they must respond about what and how much food they want on their plate. These may range from withdrawal to acting out behaviors.
- If children adamantly insist that they do not like a plated food or beverage, tell them they can say no to that food, or move food or beverage to the side of their plate, or even to a napkin beside their plate.
 - If children try a food and find it distasteful, allow them to spit it out to a napkin.
 - Think through pros, cons, and possible consequences of plated meal service. Expect and prepare for children’s resistance and concerns. Foods might be touching. Child may not want a disliked food to be placed on her plate. Child resists making a choice. Child is unhappy with his choice. Child gags simply smelling a food and wants it gone. Light eater is overwhelmed by a plate full of food. Heavy eater worries there is not enough. Some may compare amounts on their plate to others. Some children may try to please the server, rather than make personal choices.
3. Recognize potential emotional costs of changing the meal-service routine. Children may be worried as they talk about why this is on my plate; who put this food on my plate; do I have to eat it; my food is touching; where are the serving bowls; can I have more; why do I have so much; if I do not like it why is it on my plate; what if I do not want to eat this; or, I do not want that person to put food on my plate because I want you to do it. Concerns about getting their plates filled may challenge children who are just learning to wait. Responsive staff will quickly address a child’s concerns. This includes giving practical support (i.e., helping a child remove or replace a food, if appropriate) or offering information and emotional support to ease a child’s concerns.

Some children may be especially anxious about pre-plated service. Social distancing of staff and children may increase anxiety. Staff should watch for anxious children, choosing seats that allow quick up and down among distanced tables.

Outside the Mealtime

Children learn from and enjoy scooping, pouring, and sorting when they use family style service. Benefits to hand skills and cognitive skills are clear. Though children cannot serve themselves at this time, offer opportunities for these activities during non-meal activities. Equip sand and water play and dramatic play with supportive items.

Trust and Respect

Just as they do with family style meal service, staff should continue to trust and respect children's decisions about how much or whether to drink or eat. A full cup or plate can tempt adults to pressure a child to eat more food, less food, or specific foods. In quality pre-plated meal service, staff avoid pressuring children to overcome hunger and satisfaction cues.

Stay true to responsive feeding so children can stay true to responsive eating.

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