

## Fact Sheet: Family Style Meals in Child Care

Family Style meal service has long been promoted as the preferred method of meal service for the child care setting. While there is limited research that quantifies the benefits of family style vs. traditional meal service, observational evidence has shown many benefits.

Based on these observational advantages many professional associations concerned with nutrition and child care have recognized the importance of family style meals. They also recommend that child care facilities adopt practices consistent with family style meals (FSM).

These associations include:

- American Dietetic Association,
- American Academy of Pediatrics and Healthy Child Care America
- National Head Start Program
- The USDA encourages facilities participating in the CACFP to adopt family style for their meal service

FSM are recommended for many reasons that benefit both the children in care and the caregivers.

### Benefits for Children

- Builds lifetime skills such as meal presentation/preparation as children take part in the entire meal from preparation to cleanup; able to carry over the skills learned to the home environment.
- Promotes a comfortable and relaxed meal setting as everyone is sitting together
- Influences children's behavior through positive role modeling by caregivers.
- Teaches children to regulate portion sizes according to their own feelings of hunger and fullness
- Enhances development of motor, language and social skills:
  - Use fine and gross motor skills to pass and serve foods
  - Develop hand-eye coordination
  - Practice meal time conversations and taking turns
  - Practice table manners and learn what appropriate meal time behavior is (i.e. please and thank you; not to eat from serving utensils or out of serving bowls)
- Builds self-esteem as children learn new skills
- Encourages children to try new foods
  - Allows children to feel in control of their eating; children in control of their eating are more likely to try new foods
  - Since children serve themselves, they may be more likely to try something, especially if they see other children eating and taking the same foods.
- Enhances independence—growing independence in tasks is a sign of proper development
- Provides opportunities for children to learn about the foods they are eating



### Benefits for Providers

- Promotes a more enjoyable meal atmosphere as caregivers are able to sit and eat with the children instead of having to pass out plates or seconds
- Provides opportunities to talk with children

-  Decreases food waste as children learn to take about the amount of food they want (this may not happen right away as children are learning to serve themselves)
-  Reinforces skills being taught in other activities, such as taking turns
-  Improves meal time behavior as staff can quickly redirect poor behavior before it gets out of hand

### **Resources**

Happy Meal Times for Healthy Kids Module 2: Putting Nutrition Ideas into Practice. National Food Service Management Institute, 2003

Mealtime Memo for Child Care No.8, 2006 Family Style Dining in Child Care  
Mealtime Memo for Child Care 2003 Serving Family-Style Meals

From the Trainer's Tablet: Lessons for Family/Home Child Care Providers: Family Style Meals  
National Food Service Management Institute. Spring 2003

Ammerman A, Ward D, Benjamin S, et al. An Intervention to Promote Healthy Weight: Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) Theory and Design. *Prev Chronic Dis* (serial online). 2007; July. Available from:  
[http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2007/jul/06\\_0115.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2007/jul/06_0115.htm).

Position of the American Dietetic Association: Benchmarks for Nutrition Programs in Child Care Settings. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2005;105:979-986.