



Preventing Mealtime Mayhem

April's Mealtime Memo featured tips for implementing Family-Style Meal Service (FSMS). One goal of FSMS is to provide a nourishing and pleasant mealtime for all the children in your care. This memo provides information to help you avoid the mealtime mayhem that may occur when there is no plan in place or children have not been taught what to expect when using FSMS. Mealtime can bring challenges, especially when meals are not properly planned. If your organization is just starting FSMS, a new school year is beginning, or even if you may have been using FSMS for a while, it helps to explain to the children how it works and what is expected of them.

Make a Smooth Transition

Start by making a smooth transition from the children playing to them setting the table and sitting down to eat. Planning is key, especially when transitioning from playing to eating. Having quiet time prior to the meal is important to the transition. The children should clean up and make sure the play areas are clear of crayons, books, or any other items that may cause a distraction. Reading a book about food to the children is a great activity before mealtime. It will provide you the opportunity to talk to the children about the meal they will be eating. Ask the children if they have eaten those foods before. If they answer yes, ask them if they enjoyed eating the food and to describe how it tasted. Keep in mind some children will not be able to describe the taste in detail.



Consider showing educational videos such as *Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and Vegetables from A to Z* by Lois Ehlert, and following-up by talking with the children. Encourage discussions about the fruits and vegetables, or the letter(s) of the alphabet the food begins with. Ask if any of the children have eaten that food before.



At the Table

Before you start using FSMS or when school first starts, talk to the children about spills. Let them know what the plan is if there is a spill. Explain that everyone may spill something at one time or another. Some tips to make less of a disruption are to use tablecloths that are absorbent and to have paper towels ready for use if needed. Tell them to always stay calm because accidents will happen. When children know that a spill could happen and how to manage it, they will not feel bad or embarrassed. Allow them to practice pouring, passing bowls, and wiping the table, as well as cleaning the area where they ate. This practice will provide life-long lessons and make mealtime pleasant and stress-free.



When it is time to go to the table, allow children to go to the restroom and wash their hands. Explain why it is important to wash hands before mealtime. By doing this, you minimize the food safety issues associated with eating food with unclean hands.

Have children practice setting the table during playtime so they will become comfortable with it. Planning and preparing with the children is key. After they practice, have them set the table at mealtime. Let them clean their area and wipe off the table with plain water; remember, only an adult should use cleaning solution.

Tips for Success at Mealtime with Children

- Have them sit quietly and read a book, or read a story to them before mealtime.
- Allow children to use the restroom and to wash their hands just prior to sitting down at the table.
- Show them where to sit and how to pass or slide the serving dishes.
- Demonstrate how to use paper napkins and/or a dry cloth to help with a spill. Say, “That’s okay. We will put this cloth/napkin over it, and it will dry in no time.”
- Show pictures of food to the children prior to having the food item on the menu. Remember it may take several times seeing the food before the child will try it. Children will usually try items they see their friends eating.
- Use phrases such as, “Do you like that?” or, “Which one is your favorite?”



References

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