



Mealtime Memo

for Child Care

Preparing Foods with Limited Time

A busy day in a child care setting may call for many things beyond caring for children, such as greeting parents, answering phones, purchasing food, etc. Occasionally, the long list of tasks can limit the time for preparing food. On days when you are overwhelmingly busy, meal preparation can be more manageable by planning and preparing in advance.



One of the best ways to plan in advance is to create and use a cycle menu. A cycle menu is a series of menus planned for a period, such as four weeks. The menu is different for each day during the cycle and then repeated when the cycle ends. This type of menu helps to save time because the same menus are repeated during each cycle. Additionally, using cycle menus reduces the time needed for food purchases because you know what you will use ahead of time, how much you will need, and the approximate location of the food items.

Another way to plan ahead is to shop using a grocery list. A grocery list, used for shopping in-store or through a vendor's website, can be an essential tool for saving time. Think about how long it takes you to purchase what you need without a list? Sometimes, it can take hours if you factor in the total time you have to return to the store for a forgotten item. Not only can shopping from a list save you time, but it can also save you money because you are only purchasing food items that you need.

Even with careful planning, sometimes there is not enough time to prepare the planned menu. For these situations, identify a few quick and easy meals that meet CACFP meal pattern requirements that can be made completely from pantry and freezer items. Keep these items on hand so one of the alternate meals can be substituted for the planned menu when the time is limited.

The next part of the solution for saving time in meal preparation is to prepare in advance. On days that are not as busy, double a recipe for a main dish that can be properly stored in a freezer until a later date. For example, baked ziti can be easily doubled by purchasing and preparing twice the amount, and its quality is good when



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frozen and reheated. When the time is limited, take the frozen meal out of the freezer and re-heat it. Be sure to use safe reheating methods. Simply add a few sides to complete the CACFP meal pattern.

Another way to prepare in advance is to cook large quantities of certain items that can be frozen in small amounts and then used in recipes at another time. For example, a pan of chicken breasts can be cooked, diced, and frozen in measured amounts for use in future recipes. The chicken could be used in a soup recipe and then for chicken tacos on another day. Both meals will take less time to prepare since the chicken precooked. This process works for most types of meats and grains. Be mindful that storage time for these items in the freezer is two to six months. Also, use safe food handling practices for defrosting and reheating food.



In addition to preparing food in advance, you can purchase partially prepared foods. These items cost a little more, but for days when there is limited time for food preparation, the cost may be worth it. For example, a blend of diced onions, carrots, and celery can be purchased to save time in homemade soup preparation because the vegetables can be added without any preparation time for peeling and cutting.

When time is limited, planning and preparing ahead are solutions for keeping meal preparation manageable. For more time-saving ideas, visit the Spend Smart, Eat Smart website at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsavings/>.

References

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