CARE Connection

Happy Mealtimes Grab and Go Lesson

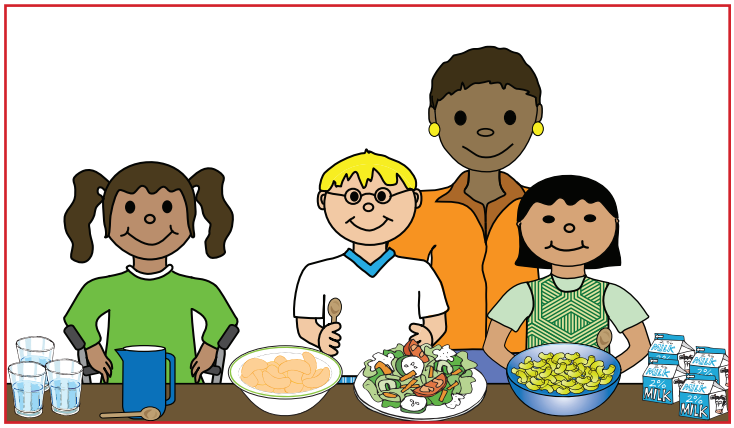
Family Style Meal Service

Meals are an important time for children to learn social, physical, and emotional skills. The food eaten at meals helps a child grow physically. The way meals are served and the eating setting help a child develop socially.

Family Style Meals

One way to serve foods in a pleasant, relaxed setting is with family style meals. In family style meal service, children serve themselves or serve themselves with an adult's help.

- All food for the meal is placed in serving bowls on the table.
- All beverages (milk, water, juice) are served in containers. The type of container will depend on state health and sanitation requirements.
- Enough food should be placed on the table to allow for the full Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) portion size required for each child to be served.
- Children are encouraged to try each food.
- Children may take second helpings of foods if they care to.



The CACFP promotes family style meal service. Here are several tips to help you meet CACFP requirements if you choose to serve meals family style.

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Adult's Responsibilities

Before the Meal Begins

- Know which food components are required for each meal or snack served.
- Review and compare the meal pattern with the planned menu.
- Make sure the full required portions of all meal components for each child are in the serving bowls and containers, as well as enough for caregivers.
- Place all foods on the table before the children are ready to sit down to eat.

During Mealtime

- Make sure children are offered each menu item.
- Help children with serving as needed.
- Sit at the table and eat with the children.
- Do not force children to eat any food or to eat more food than they want.
- Offer the food again, later in the meal, to children who either did not want any or took only a very small portion of a food.
- Allow second servings after everyone has been served.
- Make mealtime a happy time. Make positive comments. Give smiles.
- Help the children learn to try new foods, talk about foods, practice good table manners, and handle food safely.

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Child's Responsibilities

Children have some responsibilities, too. Children can

- request smaller portions or decline any of the food items.
- decide later in the meal to try foods that they have earlier declined.
- request second helpings of any food that is available after all children have had their first serving.

Remember, only one meal for each child may be claimed for reimbursement, even if seconds are eaten. You cannot claim reimbursement for second servings of meals.

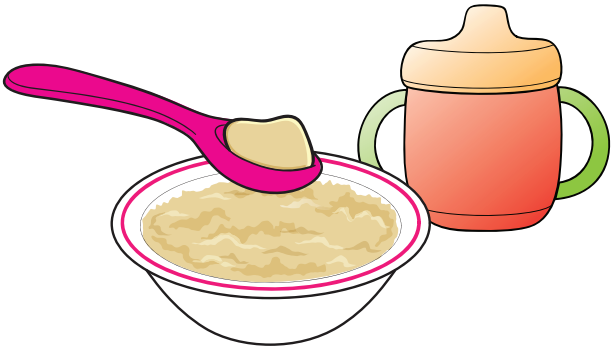
Hints for Successful Family Style Service

Safety First

Follow food safety and sanitation practices closely to make sure that the food is handled right and is safe to eat. Know local sanitation rules for serving containers. Check with your state agency or sponsor to understand what health and sanitation requirements you must follow for meals that are served family style.

Child-Size Is Right Size

Child-size tables and chairs make it easier for the children to serve themselves. Child-size plates and cups are easier for children to handle. Light weight plastic bowls and pitchers are easier for children to grasp. Serving tools—tongs, spoons, scoops—that help with serving the right portions of food are easier for children to use.



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Assist as Needed

Think about the children's abilities to serve themselves. Some children may be able to serve themselves many different foods. Others may need more help. Seat these children near you at the table. Let them serve themselves what they can. Then you can serve them the other foods that are required in the meal pattern.