

PROMOTING SOCIAL SKILLS IN THE TIME OF SOCIAL DISTANCING: MEAL AND SNACK TIMES

WHY MEAL AND SNACK TIMES ARE GREAT FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL SKILLS

Meal and snack times are part of every early childhood program's schedule. Because meal and snack times have a predictable structure, they are ideal times for teaching and practicing social skills. Children are seated in groups which allows them to communicate with multiple other children about themselves and their interests. Meals are a social activity for adults, so why not make them a social time for children, too!



**FAMILY STYLE
DINING**

**CONVERSATION
STARTERS**

PROXIMITY

**SAFETY
EXPECTATIONS**

**LUNCH TIME
PODS**

**SUPPORTING
CHILDREN**



See the pages that follow for tips on structuring whole group activities!

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FAMILY STYLE DINING

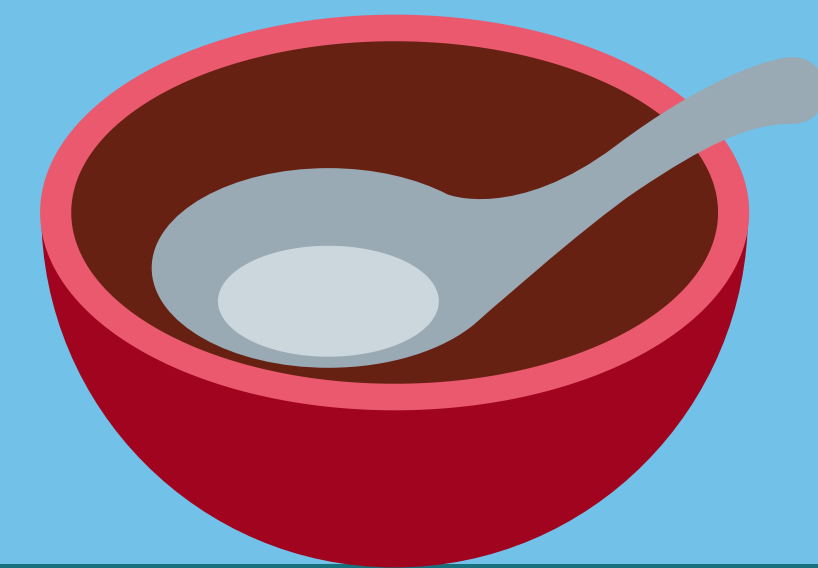
What is family style dining?

Family style dining is when portions of meal components are placed in serving dishes and pitchers, and children serve themselves with the support of caregivers who are also sitting at the table with the children.

Prior to the start of the meal, gather serving bowls, child-size serving spoons/tongs, child friendly pitchers, and individual plates and bowls for children.



Place small amounts of food components in the bowls and pitchers. Model for children how to serve themselves and ask their peers to pass materials.



Place just enough food in the serving containers for four to six children serve themselves. This will help prevent spills and ensure children are not waiting too long for food.



If family style dining is not an option based on school regulations, consider having a "food helper" who wears gloves and passes out individually packaged materials to the other children.



We know this may not be possible with Covid-19 regulations right now, but take every opportunity to build child independence.

(Kostelnik, 2019)

See next page for tips on helping children start conversations with each other!

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CONVERSATION STARTERS

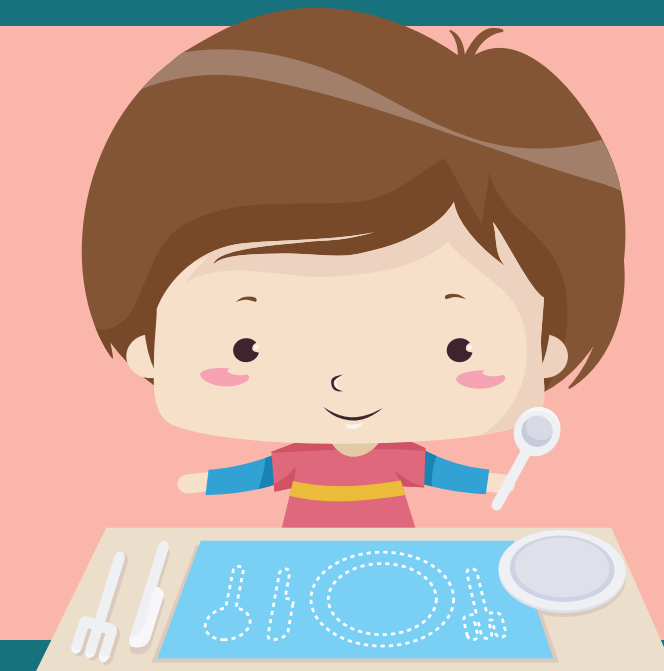
Children may need additional support to initiate interactions with their peers.

Here are some ways you can help children initiate interactions with each other:

Promote interactions between children by encouraging children to ask each other open-ended questions.



Make placemats with images on them that children can talk about. Laminate placemats to allow for sanitizing after use. Place about four images on a placemat to give children a variety of options to talk about.



Support conversations by prompting children to interact with each other. Model responses for children and use gestures to encourage turn taking during conversations.



Children should lead conversations with their peers during meal and snack times. Limit adult interruptions. Allow them to talk about their interests and provide support when conversation stops.



PROXIMITY

An adult should sit with the children on their level while they eat to support conversations and assist children with problem solving if problems arise.



Adults should be responsive to children's communication by responding to children's initiations with related comments to build positive relationships.



While children eat, provide positive descriptive feedback for following behavior expectations and engaging in interactions. Provide noncontingent reinforcement so children know you are there to support them.



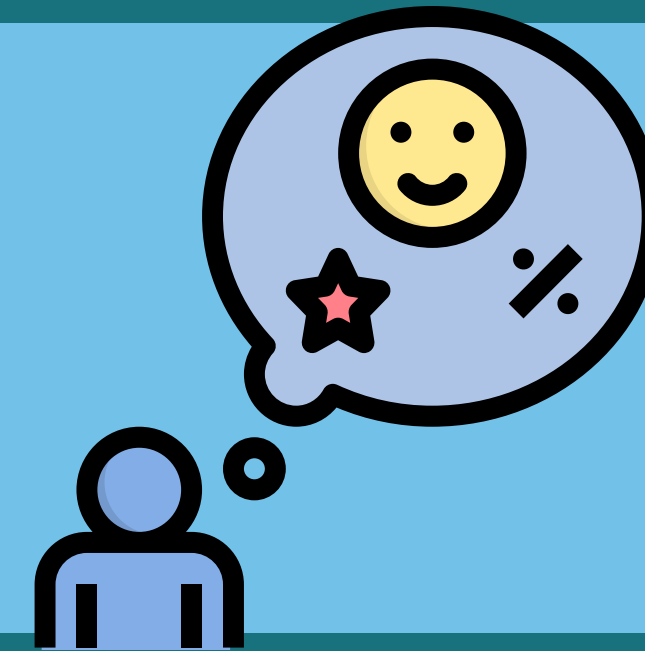
Place children who may need more support next to a strong peer model and an adult so support can be more easily provided.



Proximity involves being close to children while interacting with them and being on their level to promote joint attention.

SAFETY EXPECTATIONS

Review expectations when meal and snack times begin. Include examples, non-examples, and modeling to help children understand the new expectations and how they apply to meal and snack times (i.e., rules).



Give positive descriptive feedback and reinforcement often for following safety expectations during meal and snack times.



Prior to meal and snack times, children should wash their hands. Rotate children through handwashing rather than having them wait in line to reduce challenging behavior.



Children should only eat from their individual bowls/plates and using their own utensils. Place all used materials in a bucket to be thoroughly sanitized.



Build safety expectations into daily behavior expectations (ex: "be safe" now includes staying far from your friend) and remind children of these expectations and how to engage in expected behaviors often.

See next page for tips on children eating in small groups!

LUNCH GROUP PODS

Eating in small groups limits the number of children materials are passed between and allows children to sit farther apart to maintain a safe distance from each other.



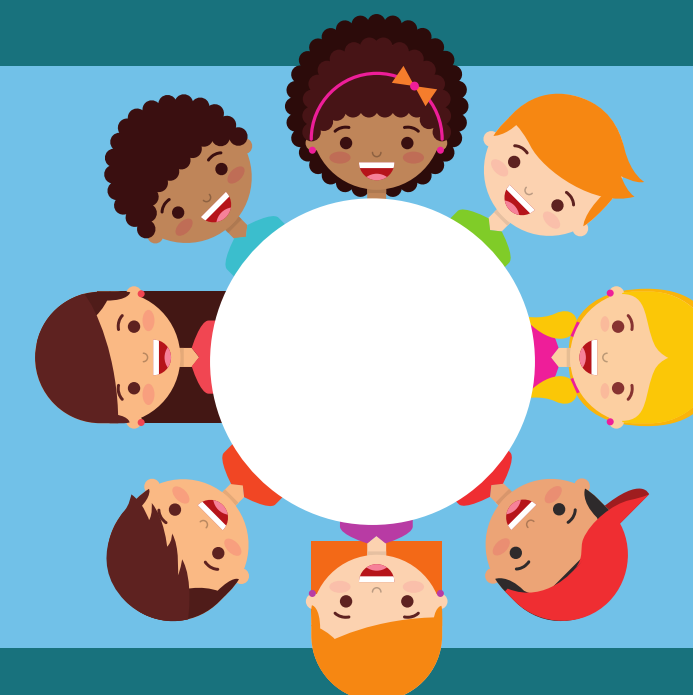
When assigning children to groups consider peer preference. Also consider which children are strong peer models for children who may need more support engaging in social interactions.



Having children eat in small groups allows children to transition to meal and snack time with less wait time as less children are having to wash their hands and receive food.



Rotate lunch group pods so that children are able to interact with a variety of peers.



Children can eat in small group pods to incorporate physical distancing while still allowing children to interact with each other.

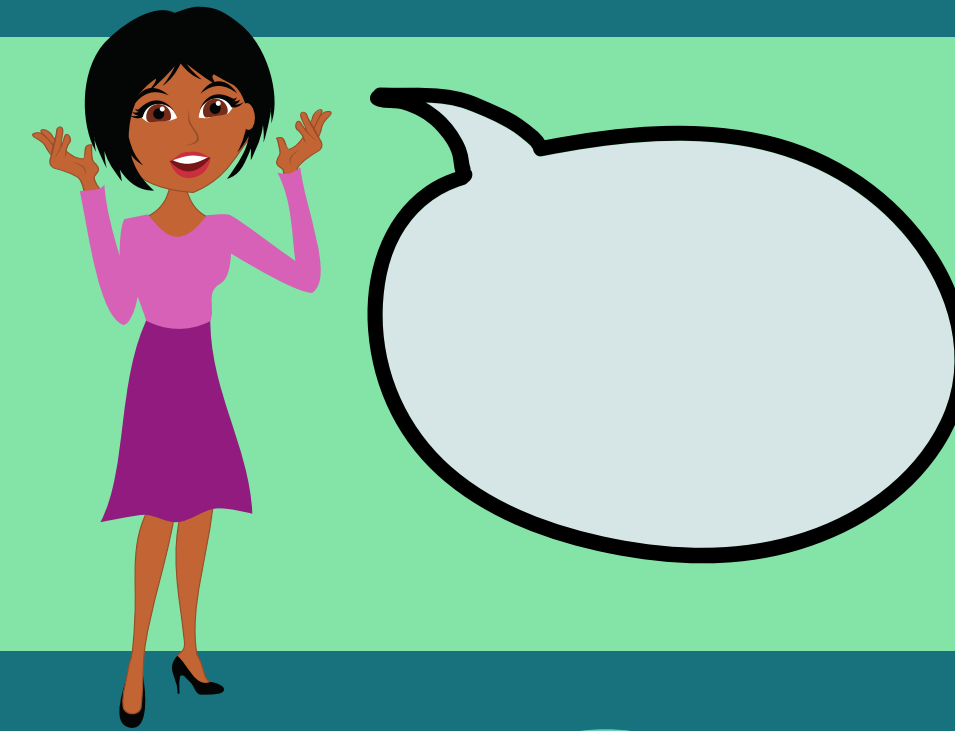
SUPPORTING CHILDREN

Teachers should support children's social skills by facilitating interactions between children.

Teach children behavior expectations related to meal and snack times and refer to these expectations often. Children may need reminders to ask each other for food or utensils.



Avoid using "No, Stop, Don't" language. Instead, tell children what they should do.



Give frequent positive attention and positive descriptive feedback often. Use this time to nurture positive relationships with children.

When problems arise (ex: spills) remain calm to model emotion regulation. Support children in identifying a solution and provide positive descriptive feedback.



Clearly communicate with other adults in the room to ensure roles are clear and everyone knows how they are supporting children's interactions during meal and snack times.



See next page for additional resources!

RESOURCES

BUILDING POSITIVE CHILD-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS



EXPRESSING WARMTH AND AFFECTION TO CHILDREN

ACKNOWLEDGING CHILDREN'S POSITIVE BEHAVIORS



SUPPORTING FAMILIES, EDUCATORS, AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

