

Making Mealtime Fun



Often, time is limited, and it is not always possible for families to share a meal together. Where this is achievable, mealtimes can be a fun and interactive activity for all family members to participate in.

Even if it is one meal per day or week, mealtimes are a chance to connect and share the day's experiences. Creating fun and positive mealtimes fosters the opportunity for children to develop skills required to be independent and active participants in learning.

How can you support your child to be an active participant whilst creating fun and positive mealtimes?

Before you eat

Allowing children to be actively involved in daily routines such as mealtime fosters the opportunity for exploration and promotes the development of positive and meaningful relationships.

- Is there an opportunity for your child to be actively involved in the decision-making processes? For example, can they choose from a list of options for dinner or lunch?
- Is there an opportunity for your child to prepare the meal? For example, can they help select the food items or assist with washing fresh produce?
- Is there an opportunity for your child to be involved in the cooking process such as mixing the ingredients?

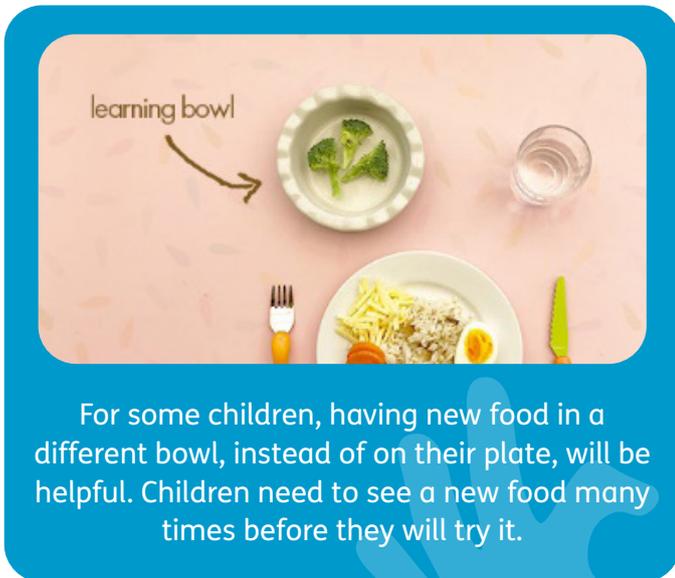
It is important that children are closely supervised by a responsible adult/person when accessing household areas such as the kitchen.

During the meal

Coming together as a family is a great opportunity to connect, further supporting the development of meaningful relationships. For some families, meals take place at the table and for others, on a rug or mat. Wherever this may be, use this moment to come together as a family.

- Is there an opportunity for your child to serve their food? This gives you control over the food on offer; however, it gives children control over the quantity of food on their plate. Such approaches motivate and empower a child to be actively involved decision-makers and participants of learning.
- Is there an opportunity for other household members to model the consumption of food, further promoting healthy eating habits? Can such opportunities be used to build a child's knowledge? For example, exploring the texture of a food item, "this red apple is crunchy" or "this yellow banana is mushy."





For some children, having new food in a different bowl, instead of on their plate, will be helpful. Children need to see a new food many times before they will try it.

- For children who are described as “fussy eaters,” it is important that their choices are valued and respected when fostering healthy and positive mealtimes. This may include ensuring that your child has access to a preferred food item when being exposed to less familiar or preferred food items.

After the meal

- Create a dramatic play kitchen area where children can continue to use the skills they learnt. Using everyday items found around the home such as pots and pans create a fun and interactive experience for young children.
- Get outdoors and explore the garden, plant herbs that children can pick and use in cooking.
- Water play is another form of play that allows children to explore quantity and further promotes the development of hand-eye coordination as they pour water from one cup to another.
- Get the conversation going and talk about what was learnt.

Keep it fun

Food play is a great opportunity to increase exposure to food and promote opportunities for learning. Food play presents an opportunity for children to use their senses to explore and try new or less familiar food items. Such approaches can also be helpful for children where they may have various sensory preferences. For example, for a child who does not like mushy foods, it may be helpful to progressively increase their exposure to play experiences where they can touch and smell mushy food items. It is important that children do not feel forced to eat an item when they are not comfortable doing so.

Other fun ideas may include:

- Going for a picnic in the backyard.
- Setting a theme for mealtimes.
- Connect with others, for example having a dinner party via Zoom or video call with family friends.
- Make it colourful, for example selecting items that are green.
- Kidspot Kitchen has a range of child friendly recipes www.kidspot.com.au/kitchen



Opportunities for learning include:

- The development of fine motor skills such as using a spoon, fork, coordinating finger foods, or chopsticks.
- The development of turn-taking skills when serving food items.
- The development of communication skills such as listening to others and engaging in language exchange.
- The development of hand-eye coordination skills.
- A child's increased capacity to attend to tasks.



Further resources

If you are seeking further information regarding your child's nutritional needs, please consult your health professional such as a GP, dietitian, or pediatrician.

For further support on promoting accessible mealtimes for children with physical support needs, please consult the above professionals or an occupational therapist. Your occupational therapist could also have ideas around making this routine more engaging for your child.

Does your child have a Speech Pathologist? They can help you with visuals as well as other resources around picky eating.

The following websites also have helpful information:

- raisingchildren.net.au/teens/family-life/family-meals-cooking/family-meals-tips
- healthykids.nsw.gov.au/munch-move-resources/
- wehearyou.acecqa.gov.au/2019/02/27/creating-positive-mealtimes/
- littlepeoplenutrition.com.au/how-to-use-a-learning-bowl-with-fussy-eaters/

