

# How Mealtimes Can Set the Stage for Better Learning, Behavior and Health in Children

## Handouts for Schools



## Setting the Stage for Healthy and Happy Customers with a Positive Mealtime Approach

**Purpose:** Raise awareness on the important role school cafeterias play in helping children create positive relationships with food.

**Target Audience:** school administrators, school food service professionals, teachers and school aides.

**School's have the opportunity to create and support a pleasant and positive mealtime environment.**

- Mealtime should be a time for students to relax, socialize and nourish their bodies and minds. When the mealtime/cafeteria environment is pleasant, students eat better, do better in their academic coursework, and have fewer behavioral problems.
- Many kids are undernourished, even if they are overfed. School meals provide key nutrients for students to grow and learn to their full potential. School meals may be the only reliable meal of the day for some students.
- School meals should serve as a learning laboratory for developing healthy eating habits and acceptable meal time behaviors. Enjoying good food with friends in a welcoming, safe surrounding could be the best part of the school day. It also shows that schools value the importance of meal time.
- Sometimes, school cafeterias are not so inviting: students are pressured to eat, supervising adults are not trained in how to be supportive at mealtime, students are not allowed to talk during meals, and meals are consumed in a hurry to get outside. This training addresses a variety of these issues and how to turn these issues into positive meal time practices.
- A Healthy Feeding Approach requires effective teamwork and communication amongst administrators, teachers, aides, school food service staff, students and parents.

**Why is this important?**

1. The experiences which kids have now with food/meals will shape their future/life-long relationships with food. The goal is to develop healthy, capable and competent eaters.
2. Meals consumed at school are essential to the growth of healthy students- bodies, minds and behaviors.
3. It's good for the bottom line; increased revenue to schools if more students participate in school meals programs (breakfast and lunch).

**Healthy and Positive Mealtime Approach Based on the Ellyn Satter Approach to Feeding and the Division of Responsibility in Feeding\*.**

- Kids eat better if they are not pressured.
- Kids eat unpredictably, waste food, and are leery of trying new foods.
- Kids stop eating and drinking when they are full.

As recommended by nutrition experts, we support a philosophy that implements a *division of responsibility between adults and children* at mealtime. Simply put,

- **Adults decide the *what, when, and where* of feeding at school**
- **Children decide *whether they will choose to eat the foods offered and how much to eat***

\*Information adapted from [www.ellynsatter.com](http://www.ellynsatter.com)



# Mealtime Philosophy

\_\_\_\_\_ School District takes pride in helping children develop healthy eating habits while at school. We are taking several steps to serve healthful, appealing meals that are consistent with the recommendations of the USDA MyPlate.

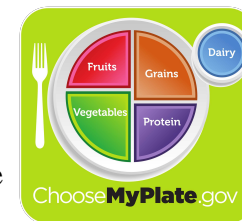
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- Children decide *whether they will choose to eat the foods offered and how much to eat*

We encourage every adult to be a healthy role model for children and to enjoy healthful foods and drinks at mealtime. Adults will not persuade, force, or shame a child into consuming any food or beverage. While we encourage children to try all foods, they can politely refuse a new food, taste a tiny amount, or simply enjoy it!

This information was adapted from material from Ellen Satter, MS, RD, LCSW, BSD, and Dayle Hayes, MS, RD for Head Start, Inc. in Billings, Montana.

# What to Say and What Not to Say in School Cafeterias



School cafeterias can help students develop healthy relationships with food. What you say can make mealtime pleasant or intimidating. All children deserve to eat lunch in a happy, welcoming and positive surrounding. Negative phrases can easily be changed into positive, helpful ones! Given time, patience and support, students can practice becoming healthy eaters.

<b><i>Phrases that HINDER</i></b>	<b><i>Phrases that HELP</i></b>
<p><b><i>Finish your milk.</i></b></p> <p><b><i>You didn't eat enough of your lunch.</i></b></p> <p>Phrases like this override a child's ability to eat/drink to their own satiety. It is better for a child to stop eating/drinking when they are full than when all of the food or milk is gone; otherwise they get used to over-eating.</p>	<p><b><i>Are you still thirsty?</i></b> <b><i>Are you finished with your milk?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Did you get enough to eat today?</i></b> <b><i>Is your tummy full?</i></b> <b><i>Are you finished with your lunch?</i></b></p> <p>Phrases like this help children recognize when they are full. Teach them to listen to their body's feeling of hunger and fullness. It is best to stop eating when they are full.</p>
<p><b><i>You need to try one bite of that.</i></b> <b><i>Please take a "No Thank You" bite for the cook.</i></b> <b><i>You should try that, it is really good.</i></b></p> <p>Phrases like this put pressure on children to eat and to try new foods. Children will like foods less if they are coerced, bribed or forced to eat them; this includes being asked to take one bite of everything. Cooks should not take it personally if children refuse certain foods. Aides should not pressure children to try one bite.</p>	<p><b><i>You are in charge of choosing which foods on your tray to eat.</i></b> <b><i>Everybody likes different foods, don't they?</i></b> <b><i>If you don't like something on your tray, you don't have to eat it.</i></b> <b><i>You might decide to try a bite of that the next time.</i></b></p> <p>Phrases like this allow children the opportunity to choose which foods and how much to eat. This is a safe and pleasant feeling, knowing that they do not have to try one bite of everything. It is a positive approach to offering a variety of foods.</p>
<p><b><i>No dessert until you have eaten all of your _____.</i></b> <b><i>(main dish, fruit and vegetables, lunch tray, etc)</i></b></p> <p>Offering some foods, like dessert, in reward for finishing other foods, like vegetables, makes some foods seem better than others. Getting a reward for finishing everything on the lunch tray can lead to overeating.</p>	<p><b><i>We serve dessert with lunch.</i></b> <b><i>Everyone gets one serving of dessert.</i></b></p> <p>Treat dessert like any other part of the meal component. Offer it with the lunch. Offer only one portion and do not offer seconds on dessert. It is OK for a child to eat the dessert first, with or after their lunch meal.</p>
<p><b><i>Hurry, you only have five more minutes to finish your lunch!</i></b></p> <p>Putting time limits on eating can pressure children to eat too much too quickly and make mealtime a stressful and rushed event.</p>	<p><b><i>You have five more minutes to enjoy your lunch.</i></b> <b><i>Fill up your tummies in the next five minutes.</i></b></p> <p>While time limits are necessary, you can make them positive. Pleasant time reminders such as calm, short phrases or playing music can be used to help children gauge the time left to eat.</p>

Adapted from "What you Say Really Matters" in *Feeding Young Children in Group Settings*, Dr. Janice Fletcher and Dr. Laurel Branen, University of Idaho and from USDA MyPlate for Preschoolers. Developed by Montana Team Nutrition, June 2009, [stenberg@montana.edu](mailto:stenberg@montana.edu), phone (406) 994-7217.

Developed by Montana Team Nutrition, 2011, 406-994-4651, [www.opi.mt.gov/MTeamNutrition](http://www.opi.mt.gov/MTeamNutrition)

## Best Practices for School Lunch to Ensure Children are Ready to Learn in the Afternoon

- 1. Insure that meal scheduling is appropriate.** It is recommended that lunch be scheduled between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. Breakfast may be scheduled up to two hours before lunch in schools that provide a breakfast as part of the school day.
- 2. Insure that there is adequate time to eat.** Nutritionists and educators recommend that children have at least 20 minutes to eat a lunch meal after sitting down. Children need at least 10 minutes after receiving a breakfast meal to eat.
- 3. Implement a "recess before lunch" (RBL) schedule.** Allowing elementary children to play first and then eat their lunch benefits students, teachers, and administrators. Studies show that RBL:
  - Improves the nutritional quality of children's meals and increases lunch and milk consumption
  - Decreases food waste
  - Improves cafeteria and classroom behavior
  - Decreases discipline referrals in the afternoon
- 4. Follow the "Division of Responsibility" mealtime philosophy to help children develop healthy eating habits.** In this approach:
  - Adults decide the *what, when, and where* of feeding
  - Children decide the *how much* and *whether* of eatingOffer small portions when introducing new foods so children do not feel overwhelmed. Successful implementation of this philosophy includes education of staff, students, and parents, as well as posting information in the cafeteria.
- 5. Train lunch aides and food service staff on mealtime philosophy each year.** Staff will follow the Division of Responsibility philosophy and will not entice, persuade, or force children to take food or eat food they don't want.

6. **Encourage teachers and other staff to eat with students.** A recent study found that when a teacher is present during mealtime to encourage children to try new foods and select a variety of foods, food consumption, and milk intake all improve.
7. **Offer choices to children through menu selection.** Children eat better when offered a choice, especially when it comes to fruits and vegetables. Try offering two choices of fruits and vegetables a day. It can be as simple as fresh grapes and applesauce or raw carrots and cooked whole kernel corn.
8. **Create a pleasant and attractive eating environment.** Survey teachers, parents and students about ways to make the eating experience more enjoyable. Possibilities include:
  - Play music to alert the children to go outside; avoid the use of whistles, traffic lights or eating in silence
  - Make cafeteria décor colorful and attractive with murals and student artwork
  - Signage can help direct children to menu choices and reinforce the mealtime philosophy
9. **Encourage adults to model healthy habits in the cafeteria.** Encourage staff to occasionally eat school lunch with the students so that students see them making healthy food choices. *Every adult can be a healthy role model by eating healthful foods or being physically active with children.* School lunch is also a great opportunity to reinforce good table manners and socialize with the students.
10. **Kindergarten and first grade children usually need a nutritious, sit down snack without other activities mid-morning or mid-afternoon.** Small children usually need nourishment every couple of hours to sustain their brain power and energy needs.

***"Hungry children can't learn: Set up feeding practices that allow children to be fed adequately for brain power and growth."***

This information is brought to you by: Katie Bark, RD, Montana Team Nutrition Program, Montana State University, Bozeman, January 2009. [kbark@mt.gov](mailto:kbark@mt.gov) or (406)-994-5641."



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Linda McCulloch  
Superintendent

DATE: July 14, 2006  
TO: School Food Authorities  
FROM: Christine Emerson, Director, School Nutrition Programs  
SUBJECT: Discipline During Meal Periods

USDA policy prohibits the denial of meals as disciplinary action against any student who is enrolled in a school participating in the School Nutrition Programs.

According to FNS Instruction 791-1, "Disciplinary action which indirectly results in the loss of meals or milk is allowable (e.g. a student is suspended from school). However, when the withholding of meals or milk is the disciplinary action; or if the disciplinary action directly results in the loss of meals or milk, it is inconsistent with the law and is not allowable (e.g., a student is suspended from school during the meal or milk period only).

**School Food Authorities shall make a reimbursable meal or milk available to any child attending school who, for disciplinary reasons, is not allowed to eat in the cafeteria."**

In addition, it is recommended that student disciplinary action take place at a time other than the school meal periods (lunch, breakfast, Afterschool snack). The goal of the School Nutrition Programs is to provide healthful meals that allow students to grow and learn. Detention and other discipline that is carried out during the meal periods interfere with the program's ability to meet this goal.

Meals should be a time of relaxation and socialization for students. When the school nutrition environment is pleasant, students eat better, do better in their academic course work, and have fewer behavioral problems. If the school's discipline policy leads to students avoiding meals or not eating well during meals, the benefits of the program are lost. Schools are encouraged to schedule disciplinary actions at a time other than meal periods.

If you have any questions, please contact School Nutrition Programs at (406) 444-2501.

*"It is the mission of the Office of Public Instruction to improve teaching and learning through communication, collaboration, advocacy, and accountability to those we serve."*

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