

Strategies for comfortable cafeterias

Use this list of best practices for school lunch to ensure children are ready to learn in the afternoon. This handout and other Comfortable Cafeterias resources are available at [Montana Team Nutrition's website](#).

1. Schedule meal times appropriately. It is recommended that lunch be scheduled between 11 a.m. and 1 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. School nutrition professionals 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.
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 eating

Offer 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 nutrition 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.



The health reason is important, but the reason why we have recess before lunch is that it helps with student behavior.”

Hawaii School Administrator

Both my daughters love it! They get to burn off their energy before they eat. They are hungrier for lunch and eat better.”

Vancouver, Canada Parent

6. Encourage teachers and other staff to eat with students. A 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:
 - Playing music to alert the children to go outside; avoiding the use of whistles, traffic lights or eating in silence
 - Making cafeteria décor colorful and attractive with murals and student artwork
 - Posting signs to help direct children to menu choices and reinforce mealtime philosophy
9. Encourage adults to model healthy habits in the cafeteria. Encourage staff to eat school lunch with students as often as possible so children see them making healthy food choices. Every adult can be a positive 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.

