

Who Needs the Mess?

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*A new **Out of the Box Training Kit** is available based on the article written by Gigi Schweikert in this issue.*

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This Beginnings Workshop project has been developed in collaboration with Joe Perreault, Family Child Care Program Manager, U. S. Army Community and Family Support Center, Child and Youth Services, Alexandria, Virginia.

An explosion in health problems related to obesity has gotten a great deal of media attention and brought the issue right to the doorstep of our schools and programs. What are you doing to support children in developing healthy eating habits? Can parents, teachers, children, and food service professionals learn from each other and improve menu planning to enhance healthy eating? Is the widely held best practice of family-style meal service the next step for your program? Turn the page and see.

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Who Needs the Mess? Family-Style Meals

by Gigi Schweikert

Gigi Schweikert is the mother of four, an author, and a national expert on parenting and early childhood education. Her latest books include, *There's a Perfect Angel in Every Child*, *Holding the World by the Hand* and *I'm a Good Mother, for the not-so-perfect mom*. Gigi directed the United Nations Early Childhood Program in New York City and developed the Johnson & Johnson System of Family Centers with Bright Horizons. You may contact Gigi at www.gigischweikert.com.



As early childhood professionals, we tend to conquer the days, quickly transitioning from one activity to the next, setting up and cleaning up, and somehow thinking that even the slightest momentary pause in our rapid pace will result in ensuing preschool chaos. We're professionals on the move, and that includes mealtime. Although we have a high tolerance for kiddy activity and noise, there's something about our organized, teacher-directed selves that derives great satisfaction from toys neatly placed on shelves, little nap mats all lined in a row and prepared plates of food ready to be eaten by "just come from the playground" kids.

Let's face it, teachers can do it faster and more efficiently, and children are hungry. No time to waste. Why not dish it out and serve it up? Most of us pour the drinks in little cups, set out food-filled plates before every chair, roam the aisles with a roll of paper towels anticipating the first spill of the day, and grab a bite on the run as we scurry to dole out seconds or stand and chat with another teacher. And for a brief moment, the room is quiet with the hush of small bellies filling up. Ah! We can admit it, one of the best things about the lunchtime rush is that naptime is soon to follow. Now there's a time of day that every early childhood professional can appreciate.

From roaming to resting

So what do you suppose would happen if we went from roaming to resting or at least sitting down with our children at mealtimes? Is it possible we might never get up again? Is there just too much to do to sit down and eat? Actually, there is too much to do, so much to teach children during mealtimes that we can't afford not to sit down. Eating is an activity all

of us will do every day for the rest of our lives for physical nourishment and social enjoyment. In preschool, we spend lots of time teaching little ones to cut and glue, but not a lot of time teaching table manners, how to select and serve yourself food, or the give and take of social conversation. Imagine an adult who can make an awesome construction paper heart, but can't sit still for a meal.

Mealtime is curriculum time

During meals, children learn social skills, language, fine motors skills, math concepts like one-to-one correspondence and ordering objects. They learn how to make choices, to develop greater self-confidence and the list goes on. Perhaps as educators, we should invest as much planning, preparation, and evaluation in meals as we do for other activities. Maybe we even need to give mealtime a spot on our curriculum plan.

Family-style meals

So how do you make the most of mealtime in the preschool setting? Serving family-style meals is the best way to give children the optimum opportunity for learning all the skills we mentioned. What is family style? In today's world that might be defined as piling all the kids in the back of the mini-van and heading to the local, fast-food drive-thru. But actually, a family-style meal means gathering around the table with bowls of food for self-serving and pleasant conversation in a leisurely, relaxed atmosphere. And since the family meal is not always happening as often as it probably should in today's busy families, that's all the more reason for us to create and allow time for a comfortable lunchtime routine.

Restaurant style or family style?

Okay, we all agree that kids learn lots during meal-time, but is it really worth all the trouble and time? It's easier and a lot less mess if we just serve the food ourselves to the children and then sit down with the kids and chat. Isn't that enough? That's a great start and a good first step for those of us who haven't been sitting with our children and role-modeling good eating habits; but for children to gain the full benefit of family-style meals, they need to learn to serve themselves and even pour their own drinks. Yes, it can be a mess, but almost everything in our field is a bit messy, from easel paint to difficult parents. Remember, you don't have to go from restaurant style to family style in one meal. You can transition slowly or perhaps start with a family-style snack.

Making family-style meals work

In the early childhood setting, family-style meals involve having the children help with table setting, self-serving, and cleaning up. Most children are eager to participate in these grown-up activities. We often need to allow more time for meals when children help, because they usually work more slowly and deliberately. But keep in mind that we're not trying to rush; mealtime is curriculum time. If the children's set-up takes a bit longer and bellies are growling, start earlier.

Transitioning to family-style meals: Mealtime tips

As educators, we all have certain social and cultural expectations of what constitutes appropriate meal-time behavior for children, and adults. We know in our own minds how a good meal goes, but somehow our expectations of children's behavior are often unrealistic. Isn't it funny how we patiently and laboriously work with young children on how to form the first letter of their name or tie their shoe; but when it comes to eating, we're often shocked and amazed that kids don't come programmed with how to's for using utensils and common etiquette? Why are we so shocked when the same young child who ate a big glob of glue during arts and crafts, grabs a handful of mashed potatoes from the serving bowl and happily stuffs them into his mouth? It's probably one of the reasons that we hold the reins of mealtime

control so firmly. Just like we have to teach children not to eat glue, we have to teach them how to eat food properly. There's so much for us to do. Here are some tips to get you started:

■ **Prepare for messy eaters and spills.** Most kids are messy when it comes to eating. Even when children understand the expectations of using utensils and napkins, the emerging development of their motor skills may prevent them from always "making their mouth." And we can expect food to fall and drinks to spill, but don't give up just because of the mess. One of the benefits of family-style meals is that children learn to eat more slowly and carefully by watching us and their peers.

■ **Have extra supplies near by.** Besides the mess, one of the major reasons that most early childhood educators don't participate in family-style meals is the constant "getting up and down" during meals to assist children. For spills, keep a roll of paper towels by your chair. Have the food cart nearby, so you can easily refill the serving bowls. Have extra plates and utensils to replace ones that children drop on the floor. A picnic caddy works great. Before you know it, you'll be able to hand a child a few paper towels for a spill without even interrupting your conversation.

■ **Allow more time for meals.** No matter how frightening the family-style meal plan may sound to you, keep in mind that the meal itself will probably only take about 15 or 20 minutes of eating and chatting time at the table. And wouldn't it be nice to actually sit down and enjoy the conversations of the young ones in our company? Set-up and clean-up will probably take about 15 minutes each.

■ **Establish a few rules.** Make sure everyone washes their hands before helping with table setting or sitting down to eat. Remind the children to use the serving utensils to touch the food and to eat or talk; but not both at once, to avoid choking. The table talk will be lively and children will need guidance about giving everyone an opportunity to speak. If you find yourself constantly correcting the children, relax a bit and concentrate on maintaining a fun and relaxed atmosphere. The children will learn proper table manners and how to behave by watching you.

■ **Use small serving bowls and utensils.** Use small, safe serving bowls and small pitchers. Plastic

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measuring cups with a spout work well as small pitchers. You may have to experiment with a variety of containers before you find the ones that work well for you. Help the children succeed by using bowls that they can lift easily or a least slide across the table to their neighbor.

■ **Help the children.** In early childhood, helping is what we do. And family style eating will require lots of help, especially initially. Have an extra set of serving containers and plates that children can use in the dramatic play area to enjoy setting the table and having their own mealtimes. Use an extra set of little pitchers in the water table to practice pouring. But don't drink it. As children learn to serve, help them hold the bowl or guide them to put just a small amount of food on the serving spoon.

■ **Respect children's choices.** You know those reality shows where they make people eat all kinds of disgusting stuff? That's how intense eating a new food can be for a young child. The flavors and textures of certain foods can be intolerable for some children. Continue to encourage children to try new foods, but don't force them. You may have to introduce a food many times before a child tries it. Another benefit of family-style meals is that picky eaters often try new foods when they see their peers or you eating them.

■ **Respect children's appetites.** Many children need encouragement to eat even the foods they like. They are so interested in the world around them that it is often difficult to focus on eating. When everyone sits down, including the teacher, and the activity of the

room is focused only on the mealtime table, children are more likely to eat. Most children have a good sense of their bodies and stop eating when they are full, so don't force children to eat. A handful of food is enough for most preschoolers. If you are concerned about a child's eating habits, either eating too little or too much, suggest that the parent speak to their child's pediatrician.

■ **Eat the same food as the children.** If you're thinking "yuck," then perhaps it's time to help prepare more appetizing meals — or maybe healthy eating is hard for you, too. Either way, even adults don't always like their vegetables. But if we're expecting the children to eat it, shouldn't we be willing to eat it, too? Children will learn the most about healthy eating by watching us. Sure, we all have our favorite "pick-me-up" snacks, but save those for break time and not in sight of the children. Imagine eating green beans when someone else is chomping on chips.

Who needs the mess? We do!

It's easy to resist family-style meals — the time, the work, the mess. But as educators, we do lots of difficult, time-consuming projects and activities with kids because we know it's good for them. And family-style meals are good for them. We'd never give up on teaching a child to speak or helping them learn to use the toilet, and eating is just as important. If the idea of family style is overwhelming, start small. Have children set the table and assist you in cleaning up. But most important, sit down and enjoy. And remember, naptime always comes right after lunch.

Another benefit of family-style meals is that picky eaters often try new foods when they see their peers or you eating them.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Take small steps: If your program isn't using family-style meal service, gather teachers around a communal table and discuss what parts might work. Break it down and find starting places as a group. Then, make a pact to try it out. Reconvene to discuss what works, what didn't, and to make modifications. Then, try again. As Schweikert says, it will be more than worth it!

Overcoming obstacles: Teachers may be reluctant to try this idea without seeing it in process. Arrange for teachers to visit a program with family-style food service already in place. Before the visit, ask teachers to make a list of what they want to focus their observations on so the time is well spent and gathers the necessary data. Have teachers report on their visits and discuss what they learned from the observation.

A Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Childhood Obesity in Early Childhood Programs

by Joyce Anderson

Involve staff, children, families, and community partners

Recent media coverage has bombarded us with statistics concerning the alarming rise of childhood obesity in this country. Since the 1980s, the number of overweight children in the United States has more than tripled! Obesity among children has reached epidemic levels. We now know that severely overweight children face a 70% likelihood of becoming obese adults and are at risk for numerous health problems including the early onset of Type 2 Diabetes, heart and kidney disease, high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, depression, and certain types of cancer (Brock, 2002; Swainson, 2000). These facts are disturbing!

As early childhood educators and advocates for children, we are daily witnesses to the difficulties that challenge overweight children. As our executive staff discussed the impact of the statistics and issues related to obesity, our Chief Operating Officer laid out a challenge before us to begin a comprehensive initiative to address this important, and timely, issue. We needed to take action! There was a lot we could do. We looked at these statistics from a different perspective; we have an opportunity before us to work together to make a difference in our children's lives. First, we made a number of observations about the children currently in our care:

- Children are in our care for more hours each day than ever before, as a result of their parents working longer hours and having extended commutes.
- Children are sharing more meals and snacks together and thus have more time to learn about nutrition and participate in physical exercise.

As early childhood educators we understand that young children's capacity for learning new skills and concepts is formed early. We knew we could create fun, age-appropriate learning experiences that would foster the development of these skills and change children's eating and fitness habits for life.

- We knew that parents were concerned about this issue and were interested in what their children were eating during their time at the center.
- We recognized that with this opportunity came a great deal of responsibility. Our initiative, if it were to be successful and effective, had to be well thought out. The strategies we developed needed to be implemented with full ownership by all the stakeholders, and they should be fully integrated into our programs on a consistent basis.
- We began our initiative by brainstorming about the ways we could make a difference in the lives of children and families at every level. We knew we had the power to prevent and cure this epidemic with children in our child care settings.

If your program decides to address this important issue, it will be most effective if it is developed within the context of a comprehensive approach. The following tips might assist you and your program in taking your first steps in working on this major health crisis affecting our children.

Getting started

Begin by identifying the issues related to childhood obesity. The National Center for Health Statistics (2000) tells us that childhood obesity is related to:

- Lack of physical activity (the #1 reason children become overweight)
- Poor eating habits

For over 40 years, Joyce Anderson life's work has been devoted to the advocacy of children and families. Her career as teacher, director, district manager, educational specialist, director of operations, and Vice President with major child care companies as well as her contribution as a curriculum advisory board member with University of North Texas, adjunct faculty member at two other Texas colleges, and licensing entities has allowed her to pursue her passion. Joyce's long association with NAEYC includes one of the nation's first programs to receive accreditation status and service as a validator, mentor, and program commissioner. She also serves as a commissioner for The National Association for Child Care Professionals. She currently serves as Vice President of Education and Training with Children's Choice Learning Centers.



- Lack of knowledge about how to make healthy food choices
- Lack of adult models who lead active lifestyles and have good eating habits
- Increase in the amount of time spent watching television or playing video games

Next, agree on a set of strategies. Everyone in the organization needs to feel a part of a comprehensive solution to this problem. Administrators, teachers, cooks, children, and families all can play a valuable role in brainstorming ideas and implementing strategies to assist children in all of the identified areas. Your initiative to address childhood obesity is more likely to be successful if all the players are committed to the same goals.

Teachers who model great habits are the best way to get children to make good choices.

Strategy #1:

Review and perhaps revamp your menus.

- Do your menus reflect the guidelines for healthy food choices in the *USDA Food Guide Pyramid for Young Children Ages 2- to 6-years-old* for both snacks and meals? Send for the latest revision of this valuable resource.
- Are whole grains incorporated in your breads and cereals?
- Have you eliminated transfatty acids from your menu items?
- Have you included the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables?
- Is drinking water available?
- Is the recommended number of dairy servings included in your menus?
- Are sugary snacks kept to a minimum?
- Do your menus reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of your families?
- Do children experience first-hand the variety of healthy food choices available?

Strategy #2:

Get your cook involved.

- Your cook can be a valuable asset in helping to adapt menu choices that are healthy and enjoyable for children.
- Your cook's attitude of optimism and pleasure in serving a well-prepared meal positively influences children's perceptions of healthy food choices.
- Encourage and implement family-style food service on a consistent basis. Family-style food service can

encourage more than social-emotional skills. In the relaxed atmosphere of "dining" with their teacher and fellow classmates, children are offered wonderful "teachable moments" that encourage healthy food choices and nutrition lessons.

- Be aware that family-style food service requires more work in putting menu items in child-size bowls and usually more utensils to wash.
- When cooks know and understand the needs of young children in relation to mealtime, it is easier to implement family-style food service.

It is always amazing to me when parents comment about the fact that their child never eats green beans at home but will at school. Teachers who model great habits are the best way to get children to make good choices.

Strategy #3:

Always have water available to children in the classroom and outdoors.

- Children and adults need water for good digestion and to maintain hydration of bodily fluids.
- Children also need water for healthy brain development during these early years.

Strategy #4:

Facilitate teacher planning.

- Teachers can design curriculum experiences to enrich the classroom environment, as well as integrate developmental skills and concepts into the learning activities.
- Set up mentoring teams with new teachers.
- With the help of parents and teachers, create prop boxes for healthy food choices and physical activities.
- Establish an area in your center where shared resources can be checked out to use in your classrooms.

Strategy #5:

Increase opportunities for children to be active.

- Integrate music and movement activities into your daily lesson plans.
- Offer movement activities indoors and outdoors.
- Schedule outdoor playtime at least twice per day.
- Encourage children playing outside to participate in active games.
- Present physical challenges to children using the playground equipment.



to 6-years-old to expand children's knowledge of nutrition.

- Read books about nutrition and fitness at Circle Time and have them available for children to read over and over again, giving them the opportunity to review the information presented by the teacher.

- Read classic children's books, such as *Stone Soup*, *The Carrot Seed*, and *Bread, Bread, Bread* in your classrooms.

- Extend shared book reading

with curriculum activities such as matching, prediction, and sequencing activities.

- Have children "journal" their food choices with pictures and words.

- Feature healthy food choices in your Science Center.

Design activities that encourage the children to describe the texture, predict the taste, and discover the tastes of a variety of foods. Use books to learn how our bodies use food.

Strategy # 9:

Share resources with families.

- Include helpful articles and pamphlets in a resource library.

- Encourage family fitness and fun by publicizing community resources such as recreation areas, gyms, parks, and walking trails.

- Create a lending library with books and videos related to health and fitness.

- Use family newsletters to keep parents informed about the activities happening at the center related to healthy food choices, physical fitness, and exercise. This will help to keep this initiative a priority.

Strategy # 10:

Secure funding to support your initiative.

- Partner with corporate sponsors and others dedicated to combating childhood obesity.

- Avail yourself of the resources of your local medical community.

- Compile testimonials from pediatricians endorsing your commitment to this important effort.

- Bring in guest speakers who are involved with issues related to health and fitness.

- Explore the wonders of your environment by going on a nature walk.
- Enroll in the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports if you serve children 6-17 years of age.

Strategy #6:

Eliminate the use of passive media (television and video viewing).

- Children should be highly engaged in fun learning activities that stimulate all developmental domains.

- Did you know that children on average watch more than two hours of television per day? When they do, they are more likely to be overweight.

Strategy #7:

Team up with families.

- Invite parents to share their favorite recipes and foods as one way to honor each child's culture at school.

- Ask parents to share their family traditions, including favorite dishes, to demonstrate how your program values the backgrounds of all children and families.

- Coordinate and schedule fun family activities related to fitness and exercise, such as community walks to raise awareness of childhood obesity, "Skate Night" at the local skating rink with all ages of children and adults, and family picnics with healthy food choices and games for children and adults.

Strategy # 8:

Integrate discussions about nutrition and fitness into the curriculum.

- Make an interactive matching game using the latest *USDA Food Guide Pyramid for Young Children Ages 2-*

As early childhood educators and advocates for children, we are daily witnesses to the difficulties that challenge overweight children.

Conclusion

As an advocate for young children, your commitment to addressing this issue is important. We have the power to make a real difference in the lives of children and families by integrating new information about nutrition and fitness into our teaching practices.

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Resources

- **Kids Health** www.KidsHealth.org
- **National Dairy Council**, 10255 W. Higgins Road, Rosemont, Illinois, 60018

For more information

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As an advocate for young children, your commitment to addressing this issue is important.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Explore the issue of obesity: Convene a roundtable discussion about obesity to assess the impact it is having on children, families, and your community. Use the roundtable's conclusions to get started identifying action steps.

Kiss the cook!: Anderson points out the importance of getting the cook on board to support children and teachers in healthy eating. Appoint a small group that includes the cook, parents, and teachers to identify ways to incorporate the nutritional recommendations in the article.

All day long: Help teachers reflect on their role in supporting active play throughout the day. Begin by doing a baseline observation of how teachers support active play and good nutritional habits. Then, work with teachers to ratchet up the amount of both using the excellent ideas in the article.

It's on the www: Download the food pyramid and host a brainstorming party complete with healthy snack choices.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



**Menu for Preschool
& School-Age**
(Week Three)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
Whole grain cereal Bananas 2% milk	Waffles with light syrup Orange wedges 2% milk	Oatmeal Whole wheat toast Fruit jam 2% milk	Ham and cheese on English muffin Applesauce 2% milk	Cream of wheat Whole wheat toast Apple wedges 2% milk	Breakfast 7:30 a.m.
Oranges 100% juice Purified water	Cheese guppies 100% juice Purified water	Applesauce 100% juice Purified water	Fruited yogurt 100% juice Purified water	String cheese 100% juice Purified water	Snack 9:30 a.m.
Enchilada casserole Garden salad with light Ranch dressing Diced peaches* 2% milk	Chicken and whole grain rice casserole Cooked baby carrots Swirled pudding 2% milk	Baked fish shapes Green beans Whole wheat bread Orange wedges 2% milk	Macaroni and cheese Broccoli Melon mix 2% milk	Grilled cheese on whole wheat bread Tomato soup Pears* 2% milk	Lunch 11:30 a.m.
Granola bars 100% juice Purified water	Toasted bagels w/cream cheese 100% juice Purified water	Blueberry pan muffins 100% juice Purified water	Trail mix 100% juice Purified water	Apple wedges Graham crackers 100% juice Purified water	Snack 3:00 p.m.

*All canned fruits are packed in their natural juices.

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Everybody Loves the Cook!

by Nancy H. Brown

Nancy H. Brown, Ph.D is now consulting in early childhood and technology, Nancy considers her work as a child care center director to have been her most favorite job. She directed centers in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and North Carolina.



"Amanda is a very picky eater. She will never get enough to eat unless I bring her lunch."

"Brandon is overweight and I want you to make sure he doesn't eat too much food."

"My daughter, Sarah, will never eat that kind of food. I have to fight with her to eat at all."

Directors hear statements like these all the time from enrolled families, prospective parents, and teachers in their program. Conversations and concerns regarding children and food are popular among parents and teachers. At a fundamental level, caring for young children means feeding them and meeting their nutritional needs. From a parent's first visit to a prospective center — including a tour of the kitchen — to monthly menus posted and distributed to parents, and daily conversations about "what she ate," the focus on children's eating habits and attitudes is primary.

For children the connection between food and the person preparing the food is clear. We nurture children in many ways; one of the first and most enduring connections for children, then, is between the person who feeds them and their feeling of being cared for. The person responsible for the food program in many early childhood programs is the cook. No wonder so many directors can say of their cook, "This is the most popular person here! Everyone loves her!"

Healthy eating: Families share the goals of the cook

Healthy eating is about more than just food and eating. Eating is a social experience. Many of our fondest childhood memories include memories of

sharing a meal with family members and friends. Families gather in the kitchen and around the table to enjoy each other's company, to laugh and talk, as well as to eat. Cultural differences may affect the types of foods we eat and how the food is prepared and served, but across cultures mealtimes are important times for bonding and coming together as a family or community. Food experiences can serve the same role in early childhood programs.

Healthy eating is also a learning time. During mealtimes at home, children:

- Learn about their family members and themselves.
- Discuss the events of the day and create dreams for tomorrow.
- Learn about food and eating: new foods and old favorites.
- Learn their families' values related to physical health, acceptable table manners, and the importance of sharing the preparation, serving, and clean-up responsibilities.
- Learn about nutrition: recipes and preparations, the effects of boiling, baking, or freezing.

The same kind of learning experiences can be incorporated into the early childhood program. The cook plays an important role in creating healthy eating behaviors and attitudes in young children.

Roles of the cook: Programs and directors benefit

The cook can influence the children's program with her attitude about nutrition and her knowledge of the social and cognitive learning opportunities available to children through food and eating experiences. The increasing incidence of obesity and Type 2 diabetes among children requires all adults working with

young children to incorporate healthy eating and exercise into their educational curriculum. Needless to say, the cook who keeps children and teaching staff happy is an asset to any program and a daily blessing to every director. Considering the importance of food in our lives, the cook is a knowledgeable contributor to classroom curriculum planning. There are, however, many factors that affect a cook's success in his/her role:

- The cook must be organized in preparing meals and snacks to fit with the program schedule and staff and children's needs.
- The cook must follow sanitation requirements related to food preparation areas, utensils, cooking containers, and storage units, taking pride in the cleanliness and appearance of her kitchen.
- The cook is careful to ensure that all appliances are maintained and working properly — refrigerator, freezer, dishwasher, and sanitizing equipment.
- Food must be served on time, at the proper temperature, and protected from any threat of contamination.
- The cook must be a skilled menu planner who welcomes the contributions of staff and children in her preparations.
- The cook maintains an accurate inventory of food and food-related supplies so that food orders are accurate and complete.

Good planning makes it possible to take advantage of grocery store/purveyor specials, to use more fresh produce, and to avoid the use of processed foods. Last minute trips to the grocery store cannot always be avoided, but they increase costs. The food storage system should be carefully monitored to ensure that food is rotated and not allowed to spoil or go unused.

Children love the cook: It works both ways

Shouts of glee welcome Miss Deanna when she enters a classroom. Children often want to stop by the kitchen to say "good morning" when they arrive each morning and to go tell her "good-bye" before leaving for the day. It's not surprising to learn that Miss Deanna knows every child and greets each child by name, offering a personal comment to each one. Nor is it surprising to hear her say that she has the best job in the program.

Why is this person so popular? Is it because she enjoys the children and they know it? Of course, that's part of it, but there's more to the story.

Why does this person love her job? Is it because the children love her and make her feel special and important? Of course, that's part of it, but there's more to the story.

The relationship between the cook and the children starts with the food. The cook prepares food that is appealing to the children; it tastes good and is easy for them to manage. The cook also provides them with choices; children can eat more of what they like and less or none of what they do not want.

When food and eating are a positive educational and social aspect of the program, children become engaged and participate. In some cases, children like Amanda become real ambassadors of the food program and teach their own parents more about healthy eating. There are always a few children who are more reluctant or "picky." In these situations, adults should not abandon their well planned food program and allow parents to bring food for their children. Instead, the response should be to offer children good food selections, to encourage opportunities to learn, and to allow children to make time to make their own decisions. This approach supports children and their development by:

- providing new information
- encouraging participation
- allowing children choices

These are elements of positive interactions with young children in all situations.

The cook can make the difference for many children who have been "picky" or whose eating patterns have been less healthy. After all, if a child is accustomed to sugary cereals and soda pop and has learned to manipulate adults by refusing to eat, turning this around will be challenging. However, the cook is identified as a special person in the program, and children are easily caught up in the enthusiasm that other children exhibit when the cook is around. When the cook welcomes the picky eater into her domain with warmth and attention, the child may have a more difficult time rejecting the food that has been so lovingly prepared. This is not to say that

When food and eating are a positive educational and social aspect of the program, children become engaged and participate.

children who reject food at home do so because they do not like the cook/parent. We all know that children can act differently at home and school — particularly agreeing to do something at school that they have refused to do at home. Once parents recover from the surprise of seeing their child act in a more positive way at school, staff can encourage them to expect the same behaviors from their children at home.

When meals are delayed, children and teachers can experience real stress.

Staff need the cook: It's about collaboration

The timing of meals and snacks in many ways affects the timing of all other activities at school. So when the food service runs smoothly, the whole program benefits. When meals are delayed, children and teachers can experience real stress. Teachers want the menu to be reliable. This means:

- Substitutions are rare
- There is always enough food
- The menu meets the developmental and nutritional needs of children. For example, young children like to identify their foods, often shying away from casseroles and mixed vegetables. Toddlers are served finger food to encourage self-feeding.

Staff appreciate the cook who is considerate of the adults working in the program and not just the children. Teachers like the food to be appealing to their own tastes so that eating with the children is a pleasurable experience for them as well. Special touches, like placing healthy treats in the staff break room, are welcomed by the staff and supplement the

child-sized portions that may not satisfy their adult appetites.

Lack of time is one of the most common reasons given by children and adults for poor food choices and eating behaviors. Indeed, it does take time and energy to provide a sound food program. Too often, teachers and administrators fall into the same trap that may have snared some parents:

- They may think there is not enough time to collaborate with the cook in planning menus.
- They may think it's too difficult to incorporate food and nutrition activities into the curriculum.
- They may think it is not efficient to include children in menu planning.
- They may think it's easier and cheaper to design a 10-day rotating menu than to constantly refine the food program to respond to children's changing needs and interests.

Teachers may be correct in thinking it's easier to allow the cook to take charge of the food program, but consider the learning opportunities that are lost for children. It is also important to consider how using a rotating menu fails to appreciate the knowledge of the cook and the important role he/she plays in developing interesting, attractive, and healthy food choices for children, contributing to their understanding and appreciation for food. The cook is a teacher; when her expertise is valued, she can create a climate in the program where food and nutrition hold their rightful place in the educational curriculum. Teachers can be supported in recognizing, appreciating, and partnering with the cook who shares her expertise and welcomes their ideas about the menu.

Using Beginnings Workshop to
Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

Meeting the big three: Does your program meet Brown's big three? Does your food program rarely substitute, always have enough food, and meet the developmental needs of children? Find out by doing spot observations for a week across age groups and classrooms. If problems are identified, work to resolve them.

Is everyone on board in your food program?: Are children, teachers, and families involved in your food program's menu planning? This idea is a powerful one to consider even if it sounds complicated. Ask for volunteers and get this process in place and working.

Connecting food experiences to learning: Brown nicely summarizes the many educational benefits of healthy eating. Brainstorm with teachers ways to integrate content knowledge (such as the food pyramid) and process knowledge (such as how to peel carrots or serve peanut butter). Plan to incorporate their ideas to provide plenty of skill practice for children who are learning to be healthy eaters.

Resources on Child Care Related Food and Nutrition Topics

National

- + The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is a rich source of information on food and nutrition topics of interest to child care programs. USDA provides information through national programs as well as through state and county levels of USDA Cooperative Extension Service.

The USDA National Agricultural Library includes the Food and Nutrition Information Center. FNIC's web site, www.nal.usda.gov, provides a directory to credible, accurate, and practical resources for consumers, nutrition and health professionals, educators, and government personnel. Visitors can find printable format educational materials, government reports, research papers, and more.



Two publications of interest are:

- *Food and Nutrition List for Child Care and Preschool Staff*
- *Keeping Kids Safe: A Guide for Safe Food Handling & Sanitation for Child Care Providers*

The National Network for Child Care, www.nncc.org, brings together the expertise of many of the nation's leading universities through their Cooperative Extension programs. NCCN's goal is to share knowledge about children and child care from the vast resources of the land grant universities with parents, professionals, practitioners, and the general public. The web site contains over 1,000

publications and resources related to child care. Publications are research-based and reviewed. Other features of the web site are: CONNECTIONS NEWSLETTERS – issued four times a year for family child care, center-based care, and school-age child care and PERSON-TO-PERSON – support and assistance from experts in child care and child development. Extension staff at each state's land grant university who are working in the area of children and youth are identified.



- + The Children, Youth, and Families Education and Research Network (CYFERNET), www.cyfernet.org, also links Cooperative Extensions

with anyone interested in children and youth. There is an extensive section on nutrition including such topics as: Breast Feeding and Infant Nutrition, Childhood Obesity, Dietary Guidelines, Food and Nutrition Activities,



Food Safety, Hunger and Food Security, Meals and Snacks, Mealtime and Behavior, Special Dietary Needs, and the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). CYFERNET also sponsors online conferences related to children and youth issues. Prior conferences, including several related to nutrition, are archived on the web site.



+ The National Food Service Management Institute, located at the University of Mississippi, www.nfsmi.org, provides information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs. NFSMI's web site contains a Child Care Materials section and includes:

- [Food Purchasing in Child Care Centers \(Manual and Instructors Guide\)](#)
- [Serving It Safe: A Manager's Tool Kit](#)
- [Serving Meals Family-Style](#)

State

+ Most universities providing Extension services and education have regional and state nutrition and health educators working closely with child care programs and some have statewide efforts aimed at broad availability, quality, and affordability issues. State Extension often has a strong partnership with the agency administering the USDA CACFP. Extension develops training and distributes information on behalf of the CACFP program.



A good example of curricula developed with Extension as a key partner is the Team Nutrition Iowa Curriculum, available at the Iowa State University College of Human Services, Department of Health and Human Performance web site: www.hhp.hs.iastate.edu/engagement-service.php. Materials at this site include:

- [Setting the Stage: Nutrition and Physical Activity Lessons for Early Childhood Settings](#)
- [Physical Activities and Healthy Snacks for Young Children](#)

+ The University of Wisconsin-Extension Early Childhood Excellence Initiative, www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/ece/, was established to increase the quality of care for the state's children. Through a group of centers, designated as Centers for Excellence, the initiative provides outreach to other child care programs in their communities in

concert with the State of Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development and local child care resource and referral agencies. Best Practices are identified and shared on the web site related to Adult Communication, Classroom Management, Cognitive Development, Curriculum, Physical Development and Health, Social Emotional Development, and Teaching Techniques.

County

There are Cooperative Extension Offices in almost every county (approximately 3,150) in the United States. While not all offices have on site expertise in child nutrition, child care, or family development, all have access to information and experts within the state Extension system. Where appropriate, county level Extension staff provide training or serve as guest speakers for staff and parent groups, help identify child care resources available to child care programs, and become involved in community initiatives to strengthen child care.



Renton Technical College Child Care Center &
Food-Related Special Needs Form &

Child's Name: _____ Child's Date of Birth: _____
Parent's Name(s): _____
Parent(s) Contact Information: Work phone(s): _____ Cell Phone(s): _____
Instructor's Name and Class Phone (for RTC students): _____

Please list the foods that your child may not have, and check the reason(s) why, and describe the allergic reaction (if applicable):

1. Food: _____
____ minor allergy ____ serious allergy ____ parent preference ____ religious reasons ____ drug interaction ____ other:
Please describe the child's typical reaction to this food _____
Must this food be avoided in all forms and/or in even small amounts (for example, if you child is allergic to eggs, is it ok to have a baked product that contains a small amount of egg such as a cookie?) _____
2. Food: _____
____ minor allergy ____ serious allergy ____ parent preference ____ religious reasons ____ drug interaction ____ other:
Please describe the child's typical reaction to this food _____
Must this food be avoided in all forms and/or in even small amounts? _____
3. Food: _____
____ minor allergy ____ serious allergy ____ parent preference ____ religious reasons ____ drug interactions ____ other:
Please describe the child's typical reaction to this food _____
Must this food be avoided in all forms and/or even in small amounts? _____
4. Food: _____
____ minor allergy ____ serious allergy ____ parent preference ____ religious reasons ____ drug interactions ____ other:
Please describe the child's typical reaction to this food _____
Must this food be avoided in all forms and/or even in small amounts? _____
5. Food: _____
____ minor allergy ____ serious allergy ____ parent preference ____ religious reasons ____ drug interactions ____ other:
Please describe the child's typical reaction to this food _____
Must this food be avoided in all forms and/or in even small amounts? _____

Does your child require the use of an EpiPen in the event of a severe allergic reaction? _____ &
What actions would you like us to take if we observe what appears to be an allergic reaction? _____ &

*Important Note: In the event that we administer an EpiPen to your child, we will first administer the EpiPen, then call 911, and then call you as quickly as possible.

Signature of Parent or Guardian Date Signed

Family-style meals can be defined as meals in which child-size tables are set with plates and utensils. Food is passed in small containers for children to serve their own plates. Children may pour their own beverages from small pitchers. The adult may need to encourage the picky eater to taste the food. Introducing Family-Style Meals. To help familiarize children with the family-style meal service, allow them to pretend to eat at a table with other children during play or center time. Family-style meal service takes time, but persistence results in children who are more relaxed and who will develop lifetime skills at an early age. Taken from Mealtime Memo for Child Care (2003-2).