Mealtimes at any age are social times. One-on-one interaction between a caregiver and an infant at feeding time is as valuable to nurturing the emotional development of a baby as the food is to nourishing physical growth. Having physical needs met in a caring, timely manner establishes a secure connection between the infant and his world. This connection continues throughout life. Feeding times that feel safe and relaxed and that follow individual schedules help infants develop healthy attitudes toward food and reinforce trusting relationships with adults.

- Infants are more at ease at mealtimes when they are with someone who is familiar with their eating schedules and who knows how to respond to their cues. Assigning each infant his own caregiver for feeding time helps to make this a comfortable experience. Infants too young to sit on their own must always be held while eating. They should never be given propped-up bottles.

- Infants who can sit on their own may sit in high or low chairs at mealtime. To continue the opportunity for pleasant interaction, each should still be fed individually and given special attention by his primary caregiver.

- Infants often have individual needs and special food requirements. Frequently, centers require that parents fulfill these needs. Food brought from home should be clearly labeled and in single-serving containers. Formula should be in original containers. All feeding information should be posted, and uneaten food should be thrown away after 24 hours.

- It is best to have refrigeration in the room to make it easy to honor individual feeding times.

- Bottles may be warmed in hot tap water but should not be left in the water for more than five minutes. Be sure to check the temperature before feeding the infant.

- For safe and sanitary meals, baby food should be removed from jars and served by caregivers in sturdy, dishwasher-safe bowls using smooth-edged, appropriately sized spoons.
- Provide sips from cups as young children are ready – usually by the half year mark.
- Provide no-spill cups as soon as children are ready. Most children can be weaned from bottles by the end of the first year.
- Never give bottles to children in cribs, and never allow children to walk around with bottles. This negatively impacts good eating habits and is also bad for teeth.
- Offering older infants finger goods, spill-proof plastic cups, and suitably sized and shaped eating utensils encourages development of fine motor skills, independence, and positive self-concepts.

From “Oops” to “A-Ha!”
Creating Positive Family Style Dining Experiences for Toddlers

The most important aspect of Family Style Dining for toddlers is the social interaction that takes place during mealtimes. Youngest children are testing new skills, and how well they’re doing is reflected back to them through their interactions with other toddlers and their caregivers. That’s why it’s so important for caregivers to fully participate in the toddler dining experience and eat with the children. By modeling the use of the utensils and by verbalizing what is taking place – naming things, pointing out actions, asking questions – caregivers create a nurturing, relaxing, supportive atmosphere where toddlers can fully participate and succeed!

- Make mealtimes pleasant and relaxing. Set an attractive table and play soft music in the background.
Energetic toddlers need small servings of food throughout the day. Provide nutritious meals and snacks to reinforce healthful eating habits. Have foods that are familiar to the children, keeping in mind the cultural mix in the classroom. Introduce new foods gradually. Serve small servings to avoid overwhelming toddlers, but make seconds available if they are wanted.

Include families and invite them occasionally for mealtimes. Ask them to share their mealtime traditions and food preferences.

Use mealtimes as learning times to practice conversation and social skills, to talk about nutrition, and to reinforce basic concept skills (colors of the foods, shapes of plates and napkins, etc.)

Toddlers are focused on gaining independence, so expect lots of control issues over food. Often choosing what they would like to eat is a way of asserting themselves over something they can control. Try not to turn this new independence into a power struggle, and help toddlers begin forging good eating habits for life. Do not force toddlers to eat all of the food offered or to eat specific things. Understand that at times they will appear not to have eaten at all. That’s OK. It’s their choice.

Toddlers are not readily able to discern personal space or respect others’ property. This is the “Mine!” stage. For more peaceful mealtimes, toddlers need to be well-spaced. The use of place mats gives visual cues to individual space.

Toddlers should be served at the table in small groups. Even the youngest can help hold a serving spoon or take a piece of bread from a platter.

“Let me do it!” opportunities are created when toddlers are allowed to help in mealtime preparations and simple “cooking” – pouring milk on cereal, spreading butter on bread, mixing chopped fruits of choice for a fruit salad. Tiny pitchers and appropriate child-size utensils facilitate these experiences with a minimum of mess.

Older toddlers can use an appropriate knife to practice cutting and spreading. This enhances the development of fine motor skills and encourages independence.

It is important for caregivers to have patience with the messes and food explorations of toddlers while gently guiding and encouraging them to feed themselves.

Things to Remember as You Interact with Children at Mealtime

Promoting independence and self-help skills involves spills! There’s just no way around this one. Caregivers must be willing to deal with messy situations and even to watch them happen. “Hey, that’s okay. Spills happen....” These should be familiar words to toddlers at mealtime. Begin mealtime with paper towels close at hand. Don’t wait until a spill occurs to go dashing for tools to clean it up. Support and encourage children in their own efforts to clean up after themselves and others.
• **Using see-through pitchers and glasses at mealtime helps children develop logic and math skills.** Spatial awareness comes with a visual picture of how much they’ve poured, and see-through pitchers and glasses allow children to discriminate between less and more.

• **Just as adults need to enjoy the books they are reading to children, they also need to enjoy the meals they share with children.** Relaxing and enjoying mealtime is often a challenge to caregivers who may continually be feeling the bustle of a classroom, but it is vitally important to do so. Organization can help. Have dishes, food, supplies, etc. close by. Children also like to participate in preparation, serving, and clean-up. Mealtime should never be rushed. Have a quiet activity available for early finishers who wish to leave the table.

• Sitting with children and sharing the same food at a cheerful and colorful table lets children know that food is to be enjoyed. **Bring flowers to the table once in a while!** Add place mats. How about a little soft dinner music? Make mealtime central to your curriculum!

• Fresh, sparkling clean dishes and flatware invite both children and adults to feel good about mealtime. **A table set with care and beauty definitely promotes good nutrition.** The child who enjoys mealtime is often more willing to try new foods and is much more likely to develop healthful eating habits.

• Remember that mealtime is not something separate from your daily curriculum. The same skills children develop during free play and group time are utilized and practiced during mealtime. **Sharing food at a cheerful table promotes child development as surely as does any other segment of the day.**

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**Important Procedures to Remember**

• Microwaves are not recommended for heating foods for infants and toddlers. There is a possibility of the food or the container overheating and creating a burn risk.

• Keep notes to pass on to each parent at the end of the day about what his child ate during the day.

• Post written menus each week so that parents can make plans about food needs.

• Assist children with gaining independence and self-feeding skills in steps as they are needed.

• Be aware of and avoid foods that may be choke hazards like hot dogs, nuts, carrots, and other hard raw vegetables.


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“Feeding Time Experiences for Infants & Toddlers” *A Staff Training Aid*  © Environments, Inc.
Recommended Equipment & Materials for Family Style Dining

Environments provides Family Style Dining equipment which meets the requirements of major Accreditation Agencies and Associations.

- appropriately sized tables and chairs so children can sit comfortably with their feet on the floor
- well-designed, age-appropriate spoons, cups, and bowls which invite infants and toddlers to feed themselves
- child-size dishes, serving pieces, pitchers, and glasses that encourage young children to serve themselves child-size portions
- appropriately sized, easy-to-grasp stainless steel flatware which lets children experience all eating utensils
- serving trays and bussing trays that allow young children to participate successfully in mealtime set-up and clean-up

For Family Style Dining equipment, see Pre3child® Catalog pages 162-167, Early Childhood Catalog pages 80-85, or go to Environments Stores at www.environments.com.

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