

## Standard 8

### Family-Style Meals

#### **Advise parents and caregivers to serve meals family-style. Provide suggestions with ways to introduce family-style meals over time.**

Family-style meal service: serving foods in bowls or dishes (of any kind) on the table. Children are encouraged to serve themselves or with help from a parent or caregiver. Parents and caregivers eat the same food, promote healthy eating habits and create a positive mealtime environment.

#### **Why is this Standard important?**

A family-style meal encourages and supports social, emotional, gross and fine motor skill development. Parents and caregivers sitting and eating with children is a chance for families to interact with each other and for positive role modeling by the parent/caregiver. Conversations at the table add to a fun mealtime environment and provide opportunities for informal modeling of good eating behaviors, communication about eating and teaching about nutrition. Family-style meals also encourage children to serve themselves, which develops hand-eye coordination.

Family-style meals allow parents and caregivers to set the stage for meal and snack times that are more productive and pleasant.

What does a family-style meal look like?

- Adults and children sit together at a table and eat the same meal.
- Mealtime conversation is pleasant and allows children and adults to interact together. Television should be off and phones put away.
- Children serve themselves from food that is passed in serving bowls with utensils.
- Parents and caregivers use encouraging words and avoid negative facial expressions, body language or verbal cues in regards to food being served.



## Help Families Introduce Family-Style Meals:

Emphasize the simple act of families sitting together at a table. If families are used to eating in front of the television or grazing on snacks throughout the day, families can start slowly with just one family-style meal per day or even one meal per week.

Meals don't have to be elaborate. Reassure families that they are doing something positive for their family when they sit down and eat a meal together, regardless of what the meal is.

Encourage families to involve their children in mealtime preparation. Even young ones can help the family by putting napkins on the table or cleaning the table with some warm, soapy water and paper towels before the meal.

Once family-style meals are established, families may be open to introducing new foods in their meals. Fruits, vegetables and other foods that may be unfamiliar to the children can be introduced slowly. Remember that long-term change is achieved by making small changes over time. Praise small successes!

## Tips to Share with Families:

### Be Ready for Spills

- Have paper towels and soapy water handy to make cleaning up quick and fun for children.
- Dry the floor to prevent slipping.
- Spills are accidents. Avoid using negative remarks.

### Plan Ahead of Time

- Model how to pass a bowl using two hands, holding a bowl on the outside so fingers do not touch the food.
- Model how to pour and scoop using appropriate utensils. Young children get better at these skills with practice.
- Model how to use table manners, such as waiting for turns, sharing and saying "please" and "thank you."

### Keep the Conversation Going

Some families describe family-style meals as feeling awkward at first, especially if it is new to the family routine. Parents and caregivers can use open-ended conversation starters to talk with their children and make the meal pleasant.

- What was your favorite activity this morning? Why?
- What would you like to do later today? Why?
- If you could be an animal, what would you be? Why?
- What clothes do you think we will need to wear when we go outside?
- What was your favorite part of that book we read?
- To me, this food tastes like \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think?
- I like the taste of \_\_\_\_\_ more than \_\_\_\_\_. What about you?



## Special Considerations

Families of children with special health care needs may face additional challenges around mealtime. Some children may struggle with feeding difficulties, food aversions or may use a feeding tube for nutrition. Encourage families to include all family members during mealtimes, even if the meal itself is not eaten. Children with special health care needs will receive the same additional benefits to family-style meals, including exposure to a positive mealtime environment, interaction with parents and caregivers as well as inclusion in typical family activities.