January 2016

Mealtime Memo for Child Care

Mealtime Conversations with Preschoolers

Positive and effective communication is the foundation for developing healthy and mutually rewarding child-to-child relationships and adult-to-child relationships. When you pay attention to children and encourage communication, you help them to create a positive view of themselves and the world in which they live. Mealtimes are no exception to great conversations; when young children participate in positive and effective mealtime conversations, they can learn about food, develop social skills, and learn how to recognize their hunger cues. Here is a closer look at how preschoolers communicate, as well as some benefits and strategies for engaging with them in mealtime conversations.

Preschoolers and Communication

Preschoolers begin to talk in sentences that are grammatically correct even though the sequence may be incorrect. They like to talk about past experiences and may pretend to have imaginary friends or experiences. Preschoolers often talk to themselves when playing and working on tasks.

Benefits of Mealtime Conversations

Talking about food's characteristics at mealtimes, like taste, feel, and smell, can create appeal, increase excitement, and magnify curiosity about food amongst young children. For example, questions such as "What happens to little tomatoes when you bite them?" or "How does the baked chicken smell?" can help children use their senses to explore food. Additionally, mealtime conversations promote social skills among young children. More specifically, pleasant conversations at the table help to expand vocabulary, encourage active listening, and assist young children in feeling more comfortable in their environment.

On the contrary, mealtime conversations can be harmful if children feel the need to eat to gain your approval. For example, encouraging a child to eat a new food by saying, "I will be very happy if you eat the pineapple," can

lead some children to eat to gain your approval. These statements can lead to unhealthy thoughts about food and self-image/esteem. Therefore, use phrases that help children:

- point out the sensory qualities of food. For example, "This is kiwi fruit; it's sweet like a strawberry." This phrase could indirectly encourage children to try new foods.
- recognize when they are full. For example, "Has your tummy had enough?" This phrase can help prevent young children from overeating because it encourages them to listen to their body.
- feel like they are making the choices. For example, "Which one is your favorite?" This phrase also shifts the focus toward the taste of food rather than who was right.

In conclusion, there are numerous benefits to engaging in mealtime conversations. Above all, when you make conversations interactive and positive, mealtimes can be a place where healthy eating habits are formed and skills are developed.

References

Choose MyPlate. (n.d.). *Phrases that help and hinder.* Retrieved from: http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/healthy-habits/HelpAndHinderPhrases.pdf

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and USDA Team Nutrition. (n.d.). *CACFP menu planning guide.* Retrieved from: http://dpi.wi.gov/fns/cacfpwellness.html

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service through an agreement with Institute of Child Nutrition at The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.

The University of Mississippi is an EEO/AA/TitleVI/Title IX/Section 504/ADA/ADEA Employer.

In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability.

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights; Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

© 2016, Institute of Child Nutrition, The University of Mississippi, School of Applied Sciences

Except as provided below, you may freely use the text and information contained in this document for non-profit or educational use with no cost to the participant for the training providing the following credit is included. These materials may not be incorporated into other websites or textbooks and may not be sold.

The photographs and images in this document may be owned by third parties and used by The University of Mississippi under a licensing agreement. The University cannot, therefore, grant permission to use these images.