

# In support of family-style meals

“Mac and cheese—my favorite,” says 4-year-old Tiffany. She lifts the serving bowl and gives herself a generous helping.

“You’re taking too much,” says Jeffrey. “I want some too.”

Tiffany frowns at Jeffrey, glances around the table at the other 4-year-olds, and returns a spoonful to the serving bowl. “OK, there!”



Tiffany and Jeffrey attend a preschool where teachers and children eat lunch family style. The food is served on platters and in bowls passed around the table. The teacher eats with the children and engages them in conversation, much as a family might eat together at home.

The practice of family-style meals is widely encouraged in early care and education but often ignored. Why is this?

## Who recommends the practice?

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides subsidized meals in early care and education programs for children who meet income eligibility requirements. One aspect of the federal food program is family-style meal service in which the children are taught and encouraged to serve themselves. Family-style meal service is recommended by CACFP, but not currently required (USDA 2014).

The CACFP handbook for child care centers states that “family-style meal service can increase children’s acceptance of offered foods and their willingness to try new foods. This is because they will see other children choosing certain food items and feel a sense of control over choosing foods and how much to take” (USDA 2014).

If a program serves meals family-style, CACFP

requires placing enough food on the table to meet the required portions for each child, encouraging children to take the full portion of each meal component, and offering second helpings to children in order to meet the portion requirement (USDA 2014).

In the states, regulatory agencies support the practice of serving meals family-style. In Texas, for example, the Department of Family and Protective Services Licensing Division addresses family-style meal service in the Minimum Standards for Child-Care Centers. Centers are not required to serve meals family style, but meal times must “be unhurried, and include adult supervision of children” (Texas DFPS 2016).

In addition, if meals are served family style, “caregivers must supervise children to prevent cross-contamination of the food” (Texas DFPS 2016). That is, caregivers educate children about such things as washing hands, not sharing eating utensils, and not licking serving spoons.



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Early childhood professionals also favor family-style meals. An article in *Young Children*, the journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, for example, summarizes the benefits of the practice and offers 10 tips for encouraging positive eating behaviors (Eliassen 2011).

## Benefits of family-style meals

Researchers have found many benefits of family-style meal service and the long-term impacts on children's eating behaviors. One benefit is that it encourages responsive feeding that supports children's internal hunger cues (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014). When children are served meals family-style, they have control over which foods and what size portion they wish to consume.

Being allowed to eat based on their own hunger level helps children learn self-regulation while identifying *satiety*—the sense of being full. Learning to regulate satiety and identifying hunger level decreases the likelihood of obesity. Indeed, preschool children participating in family-style meals eat 25 percent less than children who are served by adults (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014).

Another benefit is that family-style meal service helps children practice social and motor skills. During a family-style meal, children pass bowls, use serving spoons, and pour liquids, each action helping develop fine and gross motor skills as well as hand-eye coordination. Children also have opportunities to practice their social skills by taking turns, saying *please* and *thank you*, and making sure they take a helping size that leaves enough for other children (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014).

## Perceived barriers

Although research has shown the benefits of family-style meal service, many child care providers do not participate and perceive certain barriers in using the practice. Research conducted by Dev, Speirs, McBride, and Donovan (2014) outlines several of these barriers and addresses possible solutions suggested by providers experienced in serving family-style meals.

One perceived barrier is that changing to family-style meal service would be a difficult transition for

the children. Providers were concerned that it would be too challenging for the children to learn how to serve themselves and adapt to family-style meals. But experienced providers pointed out that children will eventually get it. Furthermore, starting with a snack or practicing fine motor skills like pouring and scooping during playtime can be helpful.

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## MESSES ARE A PART OF LEARNING.

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Another barrier is that family-style meals are “too messy and unhygienic” (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014). Experienced providers counter that “messes are a part of learning” and that children can learn to help clean their mess. Helpful instructions also reduce the mess—telling children to “hold the bowl with both hands” or “keep the pitcher in the air and have a partner hold the glass on the tabletop while pouring,” for example (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014).

Some providers believe that many children are too young and do not have the necessary motor skills to participate in family-style meal service. However, experienced providers said that beginning family-style meals with children as young as 2 years helps impart important skills. According to one provider, by the time children are in preschool, they know how and expect to serve themselves (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014).

Another concern is that children are not able to self-regulate and would choose too much or too little food, or choose only particular foods. If one child took too much food, there would not be enough left for the other children. But experienced providers said that they “believed that children can self-regulate their intake and should be allowed to eat according to their hunger and fullness” (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014).

These experienced providers also said that sometimes children need to be reminded to share the food with other children. They suggested making a rule of one or two scoops maximum (depending on the

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children's age and experience) for the first serving (Dev, Speirs, McBride, Donovan, and Chapman-Novakofski 2014).

In another study done by Dev, McBride, Speirs, Blitch, and Williams (2016), the researchers examined one especially challenging aspect of family-style meal service: encouraging children to take the required portions of specific food groups (USDA 2014). Some providers have used controlling feeding practices to get children to eat these portions, while others held that they did not use controlling feeding practices but did not seem to understand the difference between encouraging and pressuring.

Feeding strategies that worked best included role modeling healthy eating and using peer modeling (Dev, McBride, Speirs, Blitch, and Williams 2016). Modeling strategies coincide with family-style meal service in that children and teachers sit down and eat together. When children observe other adults and children trying new things, they are more likely to try a wider variety of foods and imitate the behaviors that they are observing.

## Spreading the word

The findings of research and anecdotal reports from teachers and program operators support family-style meal service as best practice. Those who ignore this practice say such things as, "The children are too young," "It's difficult to switch feeding practices," and "Serving family-style is messy."

But perhaps the real barrier to family-style meal service is the lack of knowledge of the significant benefits to children, especially those related to childhood obesity. In addition, many providers probably find it hard to believe that family-style meals can become easy over time and will teach children valuable social and fine motor skills.

The lack of knowledge can be overcome by ongoing professional development for teachers and kitchen staff. CACFP online videos could demonstrate how family-style meals can be successful and show the benefits. A more widespread understanding of family-style meal service would also help children to adopt healthier eating habits and potentially help reduce obesity in our society.

## References

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## About the author

Kelsey Colburn, a recent graduate of Texas State University in San Marcos, has completed research on food service and nutrition in early care and education programs as part of her senior coursework in child and family development. Ms. Colburn has worked in child care programs throughout her undergraduate years and plans to continue her education in the Family and Child Studies graduate program at Texas State University. ■