

Relaxed mealtimes

Feeding children and nurturing healthy eating is a shared job. Caregivers, early childhood services and children each have a defined role in feeding and eating:

Caregivers decide what food and drink is sent if lunchboxes are required. For babies, caregivers also decide whether to send breast milk or infant formula.

Early childhood services decide when and where children eat. If food is provided by the service, they choose what is offered for meals and/or snacks apart from breast milk and infant formula.

Babies from birth to around six months decide when they need to feed (hunger cues) and how much.

Older babies and small children decide how much, in what order and whether they eat a meal and snack.

This means that as a service you can take the focus off the 'what' and 'how much' children eat and focus on making mealtimes enjoyable. Creating a positive, relaxed, and social mealtime can help children to build healthy eating behaviours. You can do this by:

- Developing a mealtime routine
- Allowing enough time to eat
- Having a comfortable place to eat.

Developing a mealtime routine *

- Having a regular routine helps children understand what is expected of them at mealtimes. This can help children feel relaxed and calm about eating.
- Being relaxed at mealtimes can help build children's comfort around food and over time help them learn to enjoy a variety of foods.
- Paying attention to transitions as part of the daily routine can help children to come to the meal or snack ready to eat. Examples include: giving a reminder that mealtime is coming, handwashing rituals, playing relaxing music, doing some mindful breathing, or sharing a phrase of gratitude at the start of a mealtime.

Move Well Eat Well

- There are many different ways to approach this, but an example of a mealtime routine might be:
 - A reminder to children that mealtime is coming soon (5 to 10 minutes prior).
 - Ask some children to help with setting the tables and filling water jugs/cups.
 - Play music or a song to signal that mealtime is here.
 - Children wash their hands and babies have their hands washed.
 - Babies and children seated in a way that suits their needs, where they will be comfortable until they have finished eating (e.g. babies may need high chairs and toddlers small chairs or foot support).
 - A phrase of gratitude is shared or another ritual that signals the start of the mealtime.
 - At the end of the meal, babies are wiped and cleaned up and older children are encouraged to help e.g. scraping plates into the compost, clearing cups away and washing hands.

* where possible young babies (until around 6 months) should be fed according to hunger cues rather than routine, unless caregivers request otherwise.

Allowing enough time to eat

- Having enough time to eat gives children the best chance of feeling relaxed and calm about eating.
- If meals are rushed, children are more likely to feel anxious which can decrease their appetite.
- If children know that they have time to satisfy their bodies, it allows them to really listen to their internal body cues. This will help them to reach a happy point of feeling satisfied, but not overly full.
- Encourage children to sit with others at mealtimes. If children have had enough and finish their meal quickly and are distracting others, then it is ok to let them return to play.

Having a comfortable place to eat

- When children are seated comfortably and have a pleasant place to eat, they can concentrate on the mealtime and listen to their internal hunger and fullness cues without distraction. For more information go to:
https://doh.health.tas.gov.au/mwew/early_childhood_services/plant_fruit_and_veg_in_your_lunchbox/nurturing_healthy_eating_at_mealtimes_in_the_early_childhood_setting
- Try looking at your service's eating environment through new eyes. Is there anything that could be improved? Consider:
 - Are all ages able to sit comfortably with appropriate support for feet and bodies?
 - Is it a comfortable temperature and protected from the elements?
 - Is it quiet and calm? For example, is the spot away from the noise of busy roads, if possible?
 - Does the eating environment encourage social interaction? For example, are babies in highchairs included in the group mealtimes?
- What it means to create 'a comfortable eating environment' will be different for every service. If you are reviewing your mealtime environment, consider getting older children involved. They will bring a valuable perspective and feel proud of being part of any change.