



Pathways to Success

Helpful Strategies for Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

Making the Most of Mealtimes

Mealtime is a great chance to work on many different skills.

- **Utensil Use:** Holding a spoon or fork is the first step in learning to draw with a pencil. Practice with utensils at meal times prepares your child for more advanced fine motor skills.
- **Build Independence:** Have your child help set the table by putting out napkins, wiping the table, setting out cups or plates, pouring their own drinks and feeding themselves. These activities help children learn independence.
- **Food “Play”:** Provide opportunities for children to explore their food by putting a new food close to them. They can watch other children eat it, touch the food with their fingers or utensils, smell it or pass it around the table. This can encourage your child to try new things.
- **Language Skills:** Meal times are great opportunities to work on increasing vocabulary. As you set the table or prepare a meal, name and describe each item and action (orange cheese, salty crackers, juicy strawberries etc.) Have children count different items on their plate and compare with friends, for example, “I have six peas and three carrot sticks. How many do you have?”
- If your child is working on developing language, a communication book with pictures of the different food items can be used to help him/her make choices (for example: having your child point to a picture of juice or milk).
- **Social Skills:** Children learn to communicate with others by sitting with a group, taking turns when speaking and being served food, waiting until others are finished before leaving the table, and making conversation with their friends.

Fun facts:

- Families who eat together have a healthier diet and are less likely to be overweight. Visit www.healthstandnutrition.com for more information.
- When families eat together, children get higher grades, solve problems more effectively and feel good about themselves. Visit www.thefamilydinnerproject.org for more information.
- 25-35% of typically developing children have feeding challenges.
- It can take between 10-50 exposures of a new food before a child willingly eats it.