

## Nurturing Mealtimes

Serving meals and snacks to young children requires the same thought in planning as does planning the curriculum. In fact, mealtimes are part of the curriculum. Planning involves factors such as health, safety, nutrition, and development. Something we usually don't associate with mealtime is emotional development. What place does emotional development have in mealtimes?

### Emotional Connections

If you look closely at mealtimes, you begin to see emotional connections. We respond to infants by holding and feeding them, we help toddlers with skills in self feeding and communicating, and we guide preschoolers towards independence and towards helping each other. This connection between child and caring adult supports two basic needs: physical nourishment and emotional nourishment.

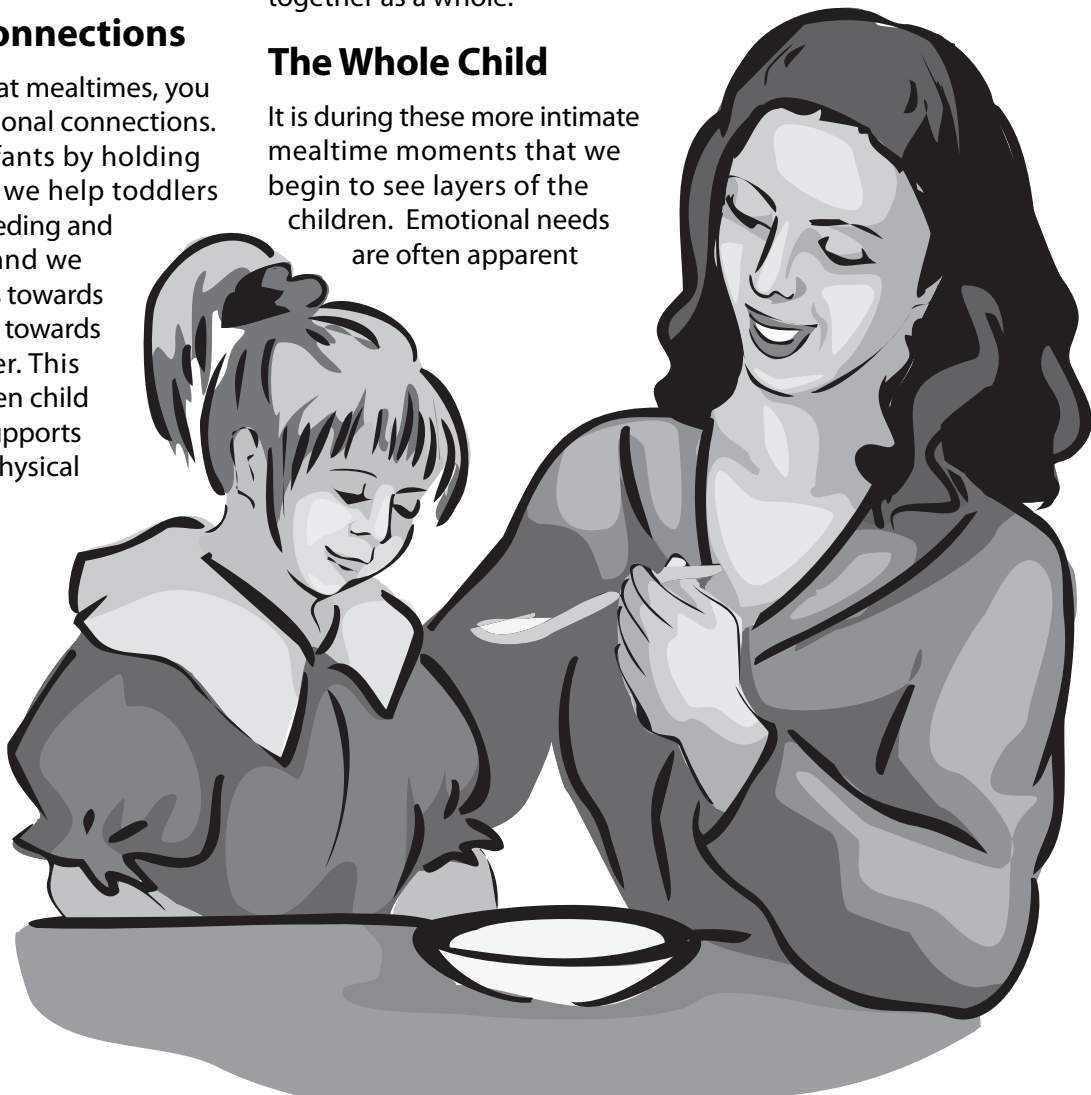
### Family Style

Mealtimes help us build personal experiences that are similar to a nurturing family. We sit together, we listen to each other, we share stories and conversations, we look at one another, we are close in proximity, and we work together. In some cases, mealtime is one of the few opportunities for the group to be together as a whole.

at mealtimes. We discover likes and dislikes. We see when a child needs help and when she is competent (developmental abilities). We observe temperaments. We hear some of the most interesting stories and make connections to what children are thinking and experiencing. Doors are opened as to how we can see the whole child.

### The Whole Child

It is during these more intimate mealtime moments that we begin to see layers of the children. Emotional needs are often apparent



# 5 steps in supporting emotional development at mealtimes or snack times:

- 1 Feed infants when they are hungry and attend to fussing and crying by gently holding the child, talking or singing softly, and making eye contact.
- 2 Bring community to the table. Use names of children and sit with the children. Guide interaction and encourage children to use each other's names ("Sarah, who is near the apple bowl?" "Ben, tell us your joke about frogs."). This is a good time to share what you saw in play ("Julie and John were painting such colorful pictures together earlier. Tell us about how you made your colors.").
- 3 Create jobs for children to help with, such as pass out cups, pour their own juice, help a friend clean up a spill, wipe off the table, throw away garbage, and fill the snack bowls (even very young children can do this).
- 4 Bring joy to the table. Try smiling, sharing a fun thought, complimenting an action, or offering help when needed. Adults often are stressed because of the extra work mealtime can bring; try to let it go and show patience and kindness.
- 5 Listen well to the children's conversations and let children know you are listening. "I love hearing about your soccer game, June. What do you like most about your soccer games?"

**Caution:** When offering foods to young children, be aware of choking hazards such as nuts, popcorn, and raw vegetables; do not give these to infants. Closely supervise eating times.

## Put on a happy face

Think of the child who is exposed to a happy, caring, attentive caregiver as opposed to one that is not. Mealtimes are a great place to pull up a chair, put on a smile, and open our hearts.

## Happy Face Snacks

### Rice Cake Funnies

Rice cakes

Spread (peanut butter, cream cheese, soft spreads)

**"Face" items:** raisins, olives, carrot strips, celery strips, apple slices, bean sprouts, pepper strips, mini-crackers, cheese sticks (whole or cut)

Apply spread to rice cake and let children add a "face." Spark thought by asking, "What do we need to make faces? What else might we add? Are they going to be happy, mad or surprised?"

### Funny Me, Funny You

This snack takes some extra preparations, but can be used again and again.

- Camera
- Copier/printer/enlarger
- Sturdy paper plates
- Glue
- Contact paper
- Food items (listed below)

Take individual photographs of each child (close face shots). Enlarge, scan, or copy the photo (large enough to fit onto a paper plate). Glue onto paper plate, let dry, and cover with contact paper (Also cover back of plate to last longer). Provide an array of snack items to create funny faces on their own face. Be sure to make one for you, too!

**Suggested snack items to make funny faces with:**

**Eyes** - blueberries, kiwi slices, olives, banana slices, raisins, pepperoni

**Ears** - broccoli, crackers, pear slices, grape slices, pretzels, orange sections

**Mouth** - apple slices, pepper slices, tomato slices

**Nose** - strawberry slices, baby carrots

**Hair** - string cheese pulled apart, bean sprouts, cooked noodles

**Other items:** Dried fruits, fruit leathers, crackers, lunch meats, soft beans, cheese

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