

Family-Style Meal Service in Child Care Programs

What is family-style meal service in child care?

Family-style meal service is where food is placed in large serving dishes on the table, allowing children to serve themselves.

Why is family-style meal service encouraged by some experts?

Family-Style Meal Service may help children learn to choose the amount of food that is right for them, from the choices available, and promote social development using meal times.



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Can my child care program use family-style meal service?

Yes, if your facility can safely accommodate this practice and your kitchen is approved by a public health inspector with Alberta Health Services. And, if your Food Handling Permit does not have any conditions that would restrict these activities.

When is family-style meal service not safe?

Don't use family-style meal service during times of outbreaks or unusually high illness rates. Children with symptoms of gastrointestinal illness, like vomiting or diarrhea, should never participate.

What will help my child care program use family-style meal service safely?

Family-style meal service is most appropriate for preschool and older age groups. There is a higher chance for food contamination with very young children. However, family-style meal service can be safe for all ages if you follow proper precautions, including supervision appropriate to age and behaviour. If there are any children with allergies, food intolerances, or other dietary restrictions, staff must take care to avoid cross-contamination between foods.

Follow the tips below to help prevent food contamination with family-style meal service:

- Make sure meal service is adequately supervised by a caregiver, preferably with staff sitting at the tables with the children.
- Immediately remove and throw out any food that becomes contaminated.
- Throw out all leftover food.
- Make sure children wash their hands immediately before meal and snack time.
- Stop family-style meal service during times of outbreak or unusually high illness rates.

Family-Style Meal Service in Child Care Programs | 2

- Consider children’s age when deciding how to serve food. For example, for very young children, staff could hold the serving dish and serve food, while discussing the amount of food the child would like on their plate.
- Consider serving foods family-style that do not present a choking hazard, or assist young children to cut food items into smaller sizes. For example, serve sliced grapes or small pieces of meat.
- Use serving utensils when possible. If utensils become contaminated, remove them from service.
- Arrange foods in a way that reduces the chance for children to touch more than one item, if not using serving utensils. For example, spread dinner rolls in spaced rows on a platter, not piled in a bowl.

For questions about family-style meal services in your child care program, contact your local public health inspector.

For more information, please contact your nearest Environmental Public Health office.

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