

Sharing mealtime responsibilities

When adults and children share responsibilities at the table, we can guide children during meals and encourage them to become more independent and adopt healthy eating habits. This is true in the home and at school.



Adults are responsible for determining meal times (when?), which foods to serve (what?), the environment (how?) and the location (where?). **Children are responsible for deciding how much to eat (how much?).**

When?

Schools provide a routine for meals and snacks that is beneficial to students. In addition to deciding when children should eat, it is also important to give children a reasonable amount of time to eat at their own pace.



Ideally, children should have **25 minutes** to sit and eat.

Adults present at mealtimes can allow children to eat slowly and until they've had enough by giving them a few extra minutes. If the time allotted for lunch is very short, the school can try to reorganize this important part of the day by rearranging the schedule or becoming more efficient (children's movements, where the lunches are kept, etc.) so children can eat without pressure.

Where?

Meals and snacks are eaten at the table, in a clean, safe and well-lit environment. Arrange the tables to encourage conversation between the children. If there are many tables, arrange them in smaller groups to limit the noise. Try to limit how much children get up and move about during meals.

How?

When adults cooperate with children, they help create a safe, pleasant environment. The children are free to talk among themselves but must keep the volume at a reasonable level for a pleasant mealtime environment. For tips on this topic, see the sheet, "A Pleasant Mealtime Environment."

What?

Parents decide what goes into a meal. They choose their child's school lunch or fill their lunch box, sometimes with the child's help. If a child does not have a lunch for one reason or another, refer to the sheet, "Procedure for forgotten lunches."



Once they are at school, it is inappropriate to forbid a child to eat certain foods in his or her lunch because you don't think they are "healthy," because:

- ▶ It is difficult to judge the contents of a child's lunch, especially when it contains home-cooked food.
- ▶ Doing so creates forbidden foods, which damages children's relationship to food.

If children do not like a particular food in their lunch:

- ▶ Encourage them to try it without making them.
- ▶ Remind them that tastes change and that sometimes we have to taste something several times before we start to like it.
- ▶ Suggest they tell their parents what they do and don't like.



All children are allowed to have dessert if it is in their lunch, regardless of whether they have finished their main dish. Sometimes children are saving a little room for their dessert.

How much?

Deciding how much food to eat is a big decision—one that belongs to children. They are the only ones who can gauge their own hunger. The adult's job is to **allow them to listen to their hunger, not to dictate how much they eat.**



You can help children recognize their signals of hunger and satiety by asking them several questions. For example, you can ask, "How do you know if you are hungry?" and "How do you know if you've had enough to eat?"

What can you do if you think a child isn't eating enough? First of all, keep in mind that children's hunger can vary due to a variety of factors, such as a growth spurt, their emotions or physical activity and how much they have eaten for a meal or snack beforehand. So don't make a child eat more, not even a few more bites! As hunger can vary, look at how much they are eating over a 2 to 3 week period. And don't forget that children eat at other times and in other places throughout the day. Their lunches do not give you a complete picture of their eating habits. Talk with their parents if you are concerned.

Defining each person's role and sharing responsibilities helps create a healthy mealtime environment will make children want to come back to the table again and again.



During Ramadan, some children fast during the day. Ask the school about their policy for respecting such practices.