


# A Pleasant Mealtime Environment

In addition to being a time to eat, mealtimes in schools are a chance for children to learn and socialize. Mealtimes must be enjoyable for this to happen. This sheet gives a few ways for school daycare staff and students alike to create a calm, pleasant environment that benefits everyone and encourages children to adopt healthy eating habits.

## Be a positive role model

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- ▶ Welcome children with a warm smile and make sure to say their names.
  - ▶ Sit at the table with them if possible and foster positive conversations to encourage sharing and create a pleasant environment.
    - For example, you can simply ask a child what he or she likes best in their lunch and why.
  - ▶ You can lead by example by demonstrating behaviours that encourage healthy eating.
    - Focus your messages on eating healthy foods rather than sending negative messages about foods to avoid.
    - Refrain from speaking about good or bad foods. **Rather, explain how we should eat certain foods every day because they are nutritious and other foods occasionally because they are less nutritious.**
    - Have a positive attitude about food (e.g., “Yum, that looks good!”).
    - Talk about how nice it is to eat together and to cook meals.
  - ▶ Ask children to be respectful of other children’s tastes and preferences.

## Strike a balance

Children have to sit still and pay attention during their lessons, so it’s normal for them to want to chat and laugh with their friends at lunchtime. They have a lot of energy to get out, emotions to express and wiggles to get out. They, of course, have to understand that lunchtime is not recess and that they need to follow the rules.

**However, we can give children more flexible guidelines during this time of the day.**



## Noise

Allow children to talk to each other but teach them to use calm, inside voices. Allowing them to talk among themselves will enrich their experience and social skills, in addition to making mealtimes more enjoyable for them.

Excessive noise can get in the way of eating, interrupt conversations and irritate everyone in the room. Try these **tricks** to keep the decibels down:

- ▶ Ask children to only speak to their table mates and to let everyone have a chance to express themselves.
- ▶ Eliminate unnecessary noise during mealtime, such as by limiting how much children can get up and move around. Play soft music to help children control the amount of noise they make. Make sure that children are enjoying the music and keep the volume down.
- ▶ Lead by example and speak with a soft, calm tone.

## Table manners to encourage

Help children by teaching them the table manners you expect from them. Give clear explanations and demonstrations. Lead by example!

Some table manners to encourage:

Some children eat more quickly than others and have a hard time being patient when they have finished. Although the ideal time to eat is 20 minutes, you can give these students permission to leave the table before others and do something else that does not distract students who are still eating. If you have the space and materials, set up a space where children can read or play board games.



*Learning Quebec codes and values may take more time for children who are newcomers to Canada. If we are to live together, it is important to demonstrate openness, patience and tolerance.*



## Listening to your hunger

By not pressuring children to eat, adults create a more pleasant mealtime environment. The children are better able to gauge their appetite and decide how much they eat. Adults have confidence in them and encourage them to listen to their hunger. For more information on this topic, see the sheets on Sharing Responsibilities at Mealtimes and Food-related Attitudes and Practices to Adopt with Children.

Because a pleasant mealtime environment helps everyone have a better day!