

# How do child care providers and Head Start teachers understand mealtimes with preschool-aged children and what are their goals for mealtimes?

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## Background

- Many children spend time in non-parental care.
  - 59% of 0–5-year-old children spend time in non-parental care each week (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021)
- It is widely acknowledged that early care and education (ECE) providers play an important role in ensuring children eat a healthy diet (Jarman, Edwards, & Blissett, 2022) and ECE settings are an important place for nutrition education (American Dietetic Association, 2005) and obesity prevention (Larson et al., 2011).
- However, we know little about how ECE teachers and providers view mealtimes, an important part of the day for nutrition education and obesity prevention.

### Research Question:

How do child care providers and Head Start teachers understand mealtimes with preschool-aged children and what are their goals for mealtimes?

## Methods

### Data Collection:

- In-depth phone interviews, 45 mins to 2 hours.
- Incentive: \$25 Amazon gift card
- Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed
- Interview schedule included questions about how mealtimes were structured, goals for mealtimes, strategies used to encourage children to eat healthy or novel foods, and understanding and use of different feeding practices.

### Analysis:

- Three coders used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore how respondents understood mealtimes and what their goals were for mealtimes.

### Sample:

- Inclusion criteria: Responsible for feeding 3–5-year-old children a main meal (breakfast, lunch, or dinner) at least three times per week
- Center-based (n=20) and home-based (n=20) child care providers and Head Start teachers (n=10) caring for preschool-aged children.
  - Center-based providers care for and educate young children in centers that are licensed by the state, home-based providers care for and educate children in their home, Head Start teachers provide care and education in federally-funded and regulated centers.
- Respondents had been providing care for an average of 12 years, 52% had a BA or higher level of education, 74% were white, and 60% worked in a center that participated in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (a federal food program that reimburses child care providers for serving healthy meals and snacks).

## Conclusions and Implications

- Child care providers view mealtime as a chance to encourage healthy eating habits as well as teach about mealtime etiquette and promote social/emotional development by helping children develop relationships with their teachers and each other.
- Mealtimes should be an enjoyable time of the day.
- Independence and social emotional development
- Building a positive relationship with food, and not feeling ashamed of eating.

### Limitations:

- Used interviews, not observations. Future research could combine interviews and observations

### Future Research:

- Interview center directors to understand mealtime policies
- Explore what kind of programming can help teachers and providers better meet their goals for mealtimes.
- Examine if providers have the training necessary to help children build healthy relationships with food.

## Results

The child care providers and Head Start teachers in our sample discussed three main categories of goals for children during mealtimes.

### 1. Eating Enough Healthy Foods

Encourage Eating	"Every meal I serve every food group... So I'll talk about why our body needs the peas or watermelon. What vitamins or minerals are in it and what they do for our body – I try to teach them why we need to eat these... I'm trying to educate and open their horizons so they're more open to trying all of the different flavors." (Home-Based Provider)
Role Modeling	"It's just role modeling what is being served. We can have them see how others are eating. If we are not eating what we are serving, then they won't eat it either. We talk about why it's important to have all the food – like I'm eating it. It's really tasty. So this helps my bones. This helps my eyes. That kind of stuff we talk about. And then they usually eat it." (Home-Based Provider)
Positive Relationship with Food	"Really just a positive attitude towards food and eating, and ... I just want them to have a positive relationship with food... Well, just having an idea of how much makes them full, not eating too much, eating 'til they're satisfied, but not overeating. I don't make them finish their food." (Home-Based Provider)
Eating Healthy Foods	"The first way would be offering all the food groups at every meal... I put it on their plates so they see what a healthy plate looks like to be eating. Offer them as many seconds of fruits and vegetables as they want. We do read books about being healthy, being active, being healthy, and then also books about different fruits and vegetables" (Home-Based Provider)



### 2. Learning Mealtime Etiquette

Cleaning	"the fine motor aspect of feeding themselves and serving themselves, the independence of being able to serve themselves and feed themselves. And then they also, they really enjoy when they get to dump their plates, ... they go to the sink and they rinse off their plates and then put it into the bucket. And they really enjoy having those responsibilities and everything." (Head Start Teacher)
Learning Table Manners	"It's the social aspect. It's learning manners, learning what's appropriate, finding out more about your friends... We do a little bit of manners training, also –please and thank you and stuff that everybody needs to learn." (Home-Based Provider)
Learning to Use Utensils	"It teaches fine motor skills by opening up their own milk cartoons. Using the forks. Stirring their own food. There's fine motor, there's lots of language going on at the table because we sit and we talk." (Head Start Teacher)



### 3. Building Relationships / Social-Emotional Development

Relationship Building	"they're having conversation around the table with each other, learning from each other, sharing interests, likes, dislikes, what they did yesterday or what they're gonna do tomorrow" (Head Start Teacher)
Talking with Children	"Like, we talk about families and things like that, so I guess it's just fun to see their opinions about things and see what it is that they're interested in talking about other than things we initiate and facilitate, but I think that's my favorite part about mealtime is that we get to sit down and really discuss with them about things that they want to talk about or things that they begin to talk about with their friends" (Center-Based Provider)
Topic of Conversation [Center]	"just the opportunity to be able to promote the healthy eating and quantities, portions and sizes. We don't only talk about that at our mealtimes. For instance, we've been talking about healthiness or something. We'll do our muscles" (Center-Based Provider)
Topic of Conversation [Home]	"It's really relaxed. It's joyful to hear what they have to say about –you know, that's when we talk about more about family stuff, their family, their siblings, their parents. It's just fun to hear what they say because it's nothing structured or nothing –the mealtime is regularly structured, but the conversation is not" (Home-Based Provider)



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