

Mealtime Opportunities for Quality Improvements in Early Learning Settings: 0-3 years

The following illustrates connections between ITERS-3, CLASS Toddler, and CLASS Infant quality measures and ways to promote healthy mealtimes in early learning settings.

Infants and Toddlers: 0-3 years		
Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
Subscale: Space and Furnishings		
ITERS-3 Item 2: Furniture for routine care, play, and learning	Have appropriate child-sized furnishings for mealtimes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For toddlers, have small tables and chairs for meals. While seated back in a chair, children’s feet should be able to touch the floor. They should be able to rest their elbows on the table and fit their knees comfortably under the table. • Furnishings should match the needs of the age and abilities of the children in care (i.e. high chairs for older infants). • Appropriate chairs, or floor space with large pillows should be available for adults to hold bottle fed infants, especially when the infant is not able to hold a bottle yet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having appropriately sized furnishings ensure safety and allow children to be comfortable, engaged, and successful during mealtimes. This helps children begin to be able to serve and feed themselves, pass food when appropriate, engage in social interactions, and limits distractions during mealtimes.

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
Subscale: Personal Care Routines		
ITERS-3 Item 5: Meals/snacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infant feeding cues should be followed when bottle feeding and introducing complimentary foods. • Bottle fed infants should be held and fed individually. Older infants can be placed in feeding chairs with trays or at the table sitting in a booster seat and fed in a small group of 2-3. Safety belts should be used. • Sit with toddlers during meals and group snacks. Toddlers can be fed in small groups up to 6 children. • Encourage a pleasant social atmosphere and conversation time. • Encourage children to eat independently with child-sized eating utensils, when developmentally appropriate. • Encourage/support older toddlers to begin to serve themselves with child-sized serving utensils and help when needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following infant feeding cues, or responsive feeding, helps children eat the amount they need to on any given day. Early eating patterns influence eating habits later in life. • Babies should never be left unattended in a feeding chair or booster seat. • Self-feeding appropriately separates the responsibilities of adults and children when the adult is responsible for providing nutrition food and the child is responsible for deciding how much of it to eat. • When children are able to feed and serve themselves, they improve fine motor skills, learn how to eat in response to hunger and satiety, and gain confidence and independence.
ITERS-3 Item 7: Health practices	<p>Adults and children wash hands before and after preparing or eating food.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are taught proper hand-washing techniques. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate hand washing before and after eating helps prevent the spread of germs and disease. • Handwashing is an important self-care skill.

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
Subscale: Language and Books		
<p>CLASS Toddler: Language Modeling</p> <p>CLASS Infant: Early Language Support</p> <p>ITERS-3 Item 10: Encouraging vocabulary development</p> <p>ITERS-3 Item 12: Encouraging children to communicate</p>	<p>Use <i>specific comments</i> to help define foods using descriptive words.</p> <p>Examples of Specific Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The carrot is crunchy and orange. • The melon is soft and tastes sweet. • You can spread the hummus on the bread just like peanut butter. • This mango reminds me of a peach. <p>Add more words and ideas to what child are doing to help children experience the food.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat or extend children’s comments such as “Yes, the strawberry is juicy. It is sweet and juicy because it is a fruit.” • Narrate what you are doing when bottle feeding or spoon feeding infants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How you talk to young children during mealtimes can help them develop reasoning skills. Mealtimes lend themselves towards using language to learn and communicate. • Taste and smell are important senses, and are prevalent during mealtimes. Use language about these senses to help children learn and remember new things. • Even though infants are too young to talk back, hearing words and being talked to helps build the foundation of future language development. Being talked to during mealtimes additionally helps them learn that meals are social and enjoyable.
<p>ITERS-3 Item 10: Encouraging vocabulary development</p> <p>CLASS Toddler: Facilitation of learning and development</p>	<p>Make connections about what children are eating to a related lesson or classroom activity they have done.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earlier in the day children learned to compare textures using the sensory table...smooth, rough, wrinkly, hard, soft. Etc. During mealtime, identify foods with different textures. <p><i>This also applies well to some activities such as Science/Nature and Math/Number.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetition of concepts strengthens working memory and the ability to use learned information in various ways and contexts.

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Subscale: Language and Books (page 2)		
<p>ITERS-3 Item 12: Encouraging children to communicate</p> <p>CLASS Toddler: Language modeling</p>	<p>Promote adult-child conversations during meals or snack time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the children questions about the food they are eating and what they like to eat as well as other topics, like what they did over the weekend and what activities they like to do. Listen to their responses. • Hold turn-taking conversations with children “What are you putting on your plate today? (Pause to give the child time to respond) Yes! You chose three crackers. I took some crackers too” • Make connections with children’s actions and how they might be feeling: “I see you are playing with your fork or getting up and down; etc. You must be getting full.” “Everyone is quietly eating. You all must be hungry.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is natural and easy to have adult-child conversations while eating together. • Meals lend themselves to frequent opportunities to ask children what they are eating or describe what they are learning about food, taste, and their bodies. • When children learn to relate feelings about hunger and satiety to specific behaviors they are learning how to self-regulate.
<p>ITERS-3 Item 13: Staff use of books with children</p>	<p>Provide a selection of books about food and eating related topics, such as where food comes from, taste and smells, and foods eaten by people around the world.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harvest for Healthy Kids curriculum provides some ideas for books: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Vegetables We Eat by Gail Gibbons ○ Tops & Bottoms by Janet Stevens ○ Up Down and Around by Katherine Ayres ○ The Hungry Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle • Readerstoeaters.com is another resource 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote children’s interest in books through connecting stories with food and mealtime experiences. This technique can help promote children’s comprehension and interest in food. • Learning about a new food from a book or story can help children easier accept or try it when it is offered during a meal. • Books are also a great way to learn about foods in different cultures around the world.

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Subscale: Activities		
ITERS-3 Item 20: Nature/science	<p>Maintain or visit a garden or farm to help children learn about nature and where food comes from.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have children help pick vegetables from a garden that are later used in a meal. • Let children explore a piece of fruit or vegetable from a garden in class. Touch, feel, smell, describe, etc. <p>Helpful resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farm to ECE - • Harvest for Healthy Kids <p>Have toys that represent food, farms, and gardens or cooking.</p> <p>Food can be used in simple science experiments and create great hands-on learning experiences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children can help make smoothies and can learn about how solid food can be made into a liquid food or how adding foods together can change flavor. • Children can add spices like cinnamon and nutmeg to applesauce and see how they change the taste. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands-on and engaging experiences about science and nature are abundant with food and eating related topics. Harvest for Healthy Kids provides materials and curriculum for learning about fruits and vegetables. • Young children often have a hard time trying and accepting new foods, especially vegetables. Hands-on experiences and learning more about the food before it is on the table increases the likelihood a child will try the food.
ITERS-3 Item 20: Nature/science	<p>Provide sand and water play with a variety of cups, containers, tools, and pitchers to promote fine motor development and practice skills that can be used during meals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage children to practice pass heavy bowls or containers of sand, pour water into a small cup, and scoop sand onto a dish or surface. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be successful at serving themselves food during a meal, children need to practice these fine motor skills outside of mealtimes. Sand and water play stations provide a great opportunity to practice these skills, such as passing, pouring, scooping, etc.
ITERS-3 Item 23: Promoting acceptance of diversity	<p>Actively promote acceptance of children with varying skill levels and abilities to feed themselves during mealtimes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify the environment and assist as needed to enable children with disabilities to participate in mealtimes with self-serving and conversations with their typical peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Including children with disabilities in mealtimes with their typically-developing peers sends the important message that children of differing abilities can all enjoy a meal together.

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
Subscale: Interaction		
<p>CLASS Toddler: Regard for child perspectives</p> <p>ITERS-3 Item 26: Supervision of play and learning (non-gross motor)</p> <p>ITERS-3 Item 28: Staff-child interaction</p> <p>ITERS-3 Item 5: Meals/snacks</p>	<p>With older toddlers, practice family style dining where adults decide what food is available and how it is presented, and children decide what and how much to eat by serving themselves and following their internal cues.</p> <p>Here are some tips that can be helpful when having children serve themselves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a variety of foods to serve to children • Present foods in a way that is easy for children to serve, based on their current skill level • Sit and eat with children during mealtimes, model how to serve and eat foods • Provide hand-over-hand and verbal assistance as necessary • Use child-size serving utensils, bowls, tables, and chairs • If children are young and still learning these skills, start with passing/serving one item per meal <p>For children too young to serve themselves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow hunger and satiety cues when bottle or spoon feeding. • Face babies during feeding. Talk to infants and young toddlers during mealtimes and make feeding and eating a positive, pleasant experience. • Assist and encourage children as they learn how to use a small cup, child-sized utensils, and their fingers to feed themselves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When children are allowed to serve themselves and choose how much to eat, they develop independence, feel safe, and learn how to eat the right amount for them on any given day. It also shows them that you value and listen to their perspective and voice, which provides emotional support. • Pleasant interactions during mealtimes are more likely when children are fed in developmentally appropriate ways. • Adults sitting with children during meals is key to modeling appropriate eating and social interactions. When at the same table, providers can also quickly intervene and help with self-service, choking hazards, or spills. • Encouraging and attending to the child’s signals of hunger and satiety is positively associated with establishing healthy eating patterns that are sustainable.
<p>ITERS-3 Item 28: Staff-child interaction</p> <p>CLASS Toddler: Quality of feedback & Teacher sensitivity</p>	<p>Encourage children to try foods but do not force them to eat something they do not want to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use positive language to remind them that we all can learn to like foods, even if you do not like it today. <p><i>This connection also applies to Language and Books</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hesitation to try new foods, or foods they have not liked, is common among young children. It can take offering and trying a new food up to 20 times before a child decides that they like it. Seeing other children and adults try the food can be helpful, as well as being given the chance to say “no thank you” and to try again on another day.

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Subscale: Interaction (page 2)		
<p>CLASS Toddler: Regard for child perspectives</p> <p>CLASS Toddler: Language modeling</p> <p>ITERS-3 Item 28: Staff-child interaction</p>	<p>Make process centered comments about children’s behaviors and internal feelings of hunger and fullness: Process Centered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You asked for more peaches and now you want more cereal. You must be hungry for breakfast this morning. “ • “You picked up your carrot. You smelled it. You tasted it. You took a bite and chewed it all up. Then...you said you liked it. You are learning to try new foods.” • “You are getting out of your chair and have put your fork down. Your tummy must be getting full. You must be done eating.” <p><i>This connection also applies to Language and Books</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference internal hunger and fullness cues during meals to help teach children how to listen to their body and develop healthy habits. Prompting children to consider their internal hunger and fullness cues helps them to think about and talk about reasons behind their actions. It also shows them that you value and respect their perspective and feelings. • Process centered comments helps children acquire words and language that reflect their own behaviors and internal feelings of hunger and fullness. Children are then better able to describe their needs and wants around eating, decreasing conflicts and struggles at the table.
<p>ITERS-3 Item 28: Staff-child interaction</p> <p>ITERS-3 Item 30: Guiding children’s behavior</p> <p>CLASS Toddler: Behavior guidance</p> <p>CLASS Toddler: Positive climate</p>	<p>Make meal and snack times a pleasant, shared, social activity. Do not use food to promote good behavior or discourage bad behavior with rewards and punishments.</p> <p>Help children feel safe to try new foods, try serving themselves, help with setting the table or cleaning up, and talking to others at the table.</p> <p>With young children serving themselves and eating, there will be messes and spills; stay positive and help children when these occur.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All of the aspects of a positive climate can be supported through adults and children sharing meals and snacks together. • Adult and children sharing a meal together can involve peer assistance, provide opportunities for matching affect, and can spark social conversations. Eating and talking together during mealtime are valuable ways to build positive relationships. • Further, a positive affect can be strengthened through doing mealtime related transition activities before and after meals together. Adults and children can naturally smile, laugh, and show enthusiasm when doing tasks like setting the table, washing hands, or clearing up dishes.

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
Subscale: Interaction (page 3)		
CLASS Toddler: Positive climate CLASS Toddler: Language modeling ITERS-3 Item 27: Peer interaction	Use mealtimes to teach social skills. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social skills such as turn taking, passing dishes, saying please and thank you, working together toward a common goal (setting or cleaning the table), social conversation norms, and negotiating conflicts can all be practiced and developed during mealtimes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social skills are strong predictors of success as older children and adults. Young children need much assistance and practice in learning these social skills. Mealtimes are wonderful opportunities for children to practice and learn these skills.
Subscale: Program Structure		
CLASS Toddler: Behavior guidance ITERS-3 Item 31: Schedule and transitions	Try incorporating these items into your meal and snack time routine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear the table of non-food items and get ready for the meal or snack • Help set the table • Wash hands • Sing a gratitude song, say a phrase, or do deep breathing activities to calm and focus children before mealtimes Clean-up after the meal is finished: Ask children to clear their place, take plates, and eating utensils to a specified area, wash hands and go to specific area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children thrive on routines and predictable sequences of activities as they help establish behavioral expectations and consistency. Mealtimes are great opportunities to build in routines and develop structure.

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Citations:

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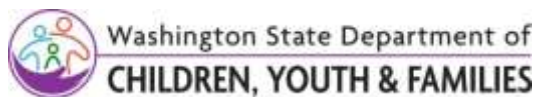
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Acknowledgment:

This publication was supported by funds from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official position of the CDC.

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DOH 140-227 July 2020 English