Mealtime Routines

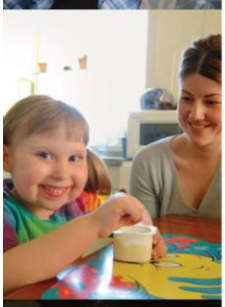
Creating good mealtime routine can help children understand what's going to happen, be familiar with what is expected of them and those assisting them, stimulate their appetite, get them interested in mealtimes, be cooperative, socialise and enjoy themselves at mealtimes. Routines should aim to follow the same predictable pattern (but still allow some scope for variation).

Before the meal

- Tell the person what is going to happen. Use language that the child can understand and visual cues such as signing, pictures or photos.
- Include the child or student in the preparation of the meal where possible, this may be as simple as looking inside his or her lunchbox together and or taking the contents out, unwrapping or placing it in a bowl or cup. Or it may be more involved such as actual food preparation (eg preparing foods/drinks) or setting up the meal area. Simple opportunities to see, smell, hear, and possibly touch containers and food items can help stimulate the appetite as well as prepare the body for eating.
- Placemats or trays with outlines for the plate, cup and utensils or photo's or pictures contacted onto tabletops can provide visual cues and assistance with organisation and pacing at mealtimes.
- Be aware of the total environment in which meals occur. Comfortable, calm, enjoyable, distraction free environments can assist both the child and the person helping. It is difficult for children who need to focus on the actual process of eating and drinking when people are continually getting up and down, moving around or doing other tasks.

After the meal

- End mealtimes with a signal to clearly indicate their conclusion particularly for children who may have difficulties understanding or those with visual, hearing or sensory impairments (eg using the sign for finish or stop, wiping the person's face, packing up utensils or helping to clean up).
- Involve the child in packing up where possible (eg put the lunch box away, put rubbish in the bin, place the dishes in the sink).



Introducing changes to the routine

Mealtime routines should include regular signals, familiar people and surroundings where possible but allow for changes. Routines can provide a basis for introducing changes such as a new food or drink, a new staff member or new location. These changes can be introduced gradually by making modification to one area at a time, while keeping other aspects the same.

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