



Family Style Meal Service With Children

in the Child and Adult Care Food Program



About Family Style Meal Service

In family style meal service, children can help set the table; serve themselves from bowls, plates, and/or pitchers on the table; and talk with others at mealtime. While family style meal service is optional in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), there are many benefits to serving meals family style. Children can:

- **Eat without pressure**—eat when they feel hungry and stop when they feel full.
- **Practice their fine motor skills**—strengthening the small muscles in their hands and fingers—while learning to serve and feed themselves.
- **Build self-esteem and confidence** by serving themselves.
- **Develop healthy eating behaviors**, such as trying new foods and making food choices.
- **Practice their social and language skills** by talking with other children and teachers.
- **Get to know other children and teachers.** Eating together can give children a sense of belonging and is valued by many cultures.

While there are many benefits to family style meal service, it can take practice. Children and adults need time to develop skills to be successful at mealtime. Use this guide to help prepare and support children, train staff, and meet CACFP meal pattern requirements to successfully serve meals family style at your site.

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Preparing for Family Style Meal Service

What Supplies Do I Need to Start?

Special equipment for family style meal service is not required. However, most servingware and dishes are made for adults, which can be too big or heavy for young children. If possible, try to buy supplies that are child-sized and unbreakable. Check with your sponsoring organization or State agency about using CACFP funds to buy equipment to get you started. Read the chart below for more information on dishes and utensils that are “child-size.”

Child-Size Dishes and Utensils With Estimated Sizes



***Measuring cups and spoodles make great serving spoons.** Match the size of the serving spoon to amounts listed in the CACFP meal pattern requirements for each meal component. For example, if the meal pattern calls for $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of fruit, use a $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup measuring cup or 4-ounce spoodle.

Individual adaptive equipment for children with a disability may be needed to help every child be successful at mealtime.



Utensils with larger handles



Scooped-rim bowl with a bottom suction



“Cut-out” cup or straw cup with lid



Tip! Use Different Colors of Pitchers and Cups

Use different colors of pitchers and cups to help children get the type of milk required in the CACFP for their age. For example, 1-year olds must be offered unflavored whole milk. So, put whole milk in a red pitcher labeled “whole milk” and give each 1-year old a red cup. Two-year olds must be offered unflavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk. Put their milk in a blue pitcher labeled “low-fat (1%) milk” or “fat-free (skim) milk” and give them blue cups. This way you can quickly tell which child should get which type of milk at mealtime.

How Can I Prepare Children Before Starting?

Talk About How Meals Will Be Served

- **Tell children that their classroom will start to serve meals and snacks in a different way.** The food will be on the tables in shared bowls and plates. Children will take the food from the shared bowls and plates and put it on their own plates. Milk may be available in pitchers for children to pour and serve themselves from.
- **Talk about the rules for serving themselves in family style meals.** Use USDA Team Nutrition’s “Rules for Family Style Meals” poster at TeamNutrition.USDA.gov.
- **Discuss important steps for family style meal service and the children’s role.** Use USDA Team Nutrition’s “Let’s Eat ‘Family Style’” poster at TeamNutrition.USDA.gov.

Provide Opportunities for Children to Learn Through Play

Add child-size serving spoons, tongs, and pitchers to play areas. This will allow children to strengthen their fine motor skills (grasping, pinching, picking up small objects) that they need to serve themselves. For example, children can practice:

- Pouring liquid from a pitcher into a cup at the water table.
- Scooping cotton balls with a measuring cup and putting them in a small bowl.
- Using child-size tongs to move pretend food or pieces of yarn from one plate to another.
- Practice setting the table using place mats, plates, cups, forks and spoons in the play area.



Start Family Style Meal Service Slowly


- **Have the children practice with one meal component before serving all meal components family style.** For example, children can pass around dinner rolls with child-size tongs while you pre-plate the rest of the meal components.
- **Begin with a snack.** It requires less meal preparation and tends to include foods that are easier for children to serve themselves. Serve more items “family style” as children strengthen their skills.

Explain That Children Can be “Special Helpers” at Mealtimes

There are many ways children can help during family style meal service. Explain that you may assign a role to them at mealtimes. Tasks may include:

- Setting individual place settings (bowls, plates, cups, napkins, and utensils).
- Placing serving bowls and plates of food on the table.
- Cleaning up messes.



 Family style meal service posters are available! Find them at TeamNutrition.USDA.gov.



What Can I Do to Help Staff and Parents/Guardians Before Starting?

Child Care Staff

Before starting family style meal service, gather with teachers, food service staff, and others to explain this new style of serving meals. If possible, serve a meal or snack during this training to allow staff to practice family style meal service while they're learning. It may help to explain:

- The benefits to children (see page 2).
- The steps to family style meal service (see page 4 for the “Let’s Eat ‘Family Style’” poster).
- How to encourage children to try new foods (see page 4 for the “Let’s Talk at Mealtime” poster).
- That food must be offered but does not need to be put on a child’s plate (see page 6).
- Ways to help children learn to serve themselves (see page 11).



Meal Counts

Be sure to assign someone for each classroom to take the required meal count at each mealtime. Meal counts must be taken while children are eating, not before and not after the meal service is over. Daily attendance records must not be used in place of meal count records.

For more information on required documentation, please contact your sponsoring organization or State agency.

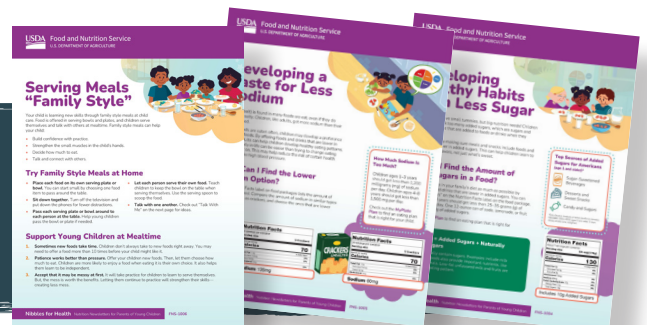
Parents and Guardians

Send a message home to let parents/guardians know your site will be starting family style meal service. Spread the word and share USDA Team Nutrition’s Nibbles for Health parent newsletter “Serving Meals ‘Family Style’” at fns.usda.gov/tn/nibbles. Hand it out at pickup time, add it to your newsletter, or share it on social media and/or classroom apps.

Food Service Staff, Caterers, and Food Vendors

If you work with food service staff, caterers, or food vendors, let them know you would like to start serving meals family style. Explain that you would like to have food in serving bowls or plates, so children can serve themselves. See page 3 for more information on suggested supplies.

Communicate with food service staff about the number of children in each classroom, number of children seated at each table, and the age groups of children being served. This coordination helps ensure that the shared serving bowls and plates placed on each table have enough of the required portions for each child seated at the table.



Nibbles for Health parent newsletters are available!
Find them at fns.usda.gov/tn/nibbles.

Following Requirements During Family Style Meal Service

How Do I Make Sure I'm Providing Enough Food For Each Child?

It is a requirement to offer the full portion size in the serving bowl or serving plate for each child. To provide enough food for each child:

- 1. Calculate** the minimum amount of food needed for each child at that meal or snack. Check out pages 7–8 to determine how much food to prepare and provide at meals and snacks for children from one or more age groups.
- 2. Provide** the full portion of each meal component for every child seated at the table in serving bowl(s), plate(s), and/or pitcher(s).
- 3. Place** all serving bowl(s), plate(s), and/or pitcher(s) on the table where the children are seated for the meal and snack.
- 4. Offer** each meal component to each child at the table. A child does not need to put the food on their plate or eat the food for the meal or snack to be reimbursable.



Tip! Add a Line to the Cup

If a child's cup is larger than the portion size required by CACFP meal pattern requirements, add a line on the outside of the cup to show where to fill. For example, a 3-year old must be offered at least 4 fluid ounces ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup) of milk at snack in the CACFP. Measure and mark 4 fluid ounces ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup) on the outside of each child's cup so they can see when to stop pouring.



Calculate the Amount of Food for a Single Age Group

There are two steps to follow when determining the total amount of food to provide during meals and snacks to children from a **single age group** (such as 1- through 2-year olds).

1 Determine the minimum amount of food* needed for each child at the meal or snack.

2 Multiply the minimum amount of food (from Step One) by the number of children at the meal or snack.

Example:

Happy Day Child Care wants to offer diced peaches at lunch to the 2-year old classroom. This classroom has twelve 2-year olds in class today.

1 Determine the minimum amount of food* needed for each child at the meal or snack:

- The minimum amount of fruit needed at lunch for each 2-year old is $\frac{1}{8}$ cup (or **0.125 cup**).

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child
Lunch	2 years	Diced peaches	0.125 cup

2 Multiply the minimum amount of food (from Step One) by the number of children at the meal or snack.

- 0.125 cup of diced peaches x **12** children = **1.5 cups** (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups) of diced peaches

Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals	Total
x	12	=	1.5 cups

Happy Day Child Care should provide at least 1.5 cups (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups) of diced peaches at lunch to the 2-year old classroom that day. The 1.5 cups of diced peaches can be placed in one serving bowl if all 12 children are sitting at one table. If they are sitting at more than one table, split the 1.5 cups into smaller bowls that may be easier for children to hold and pass at each table.

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child	Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals	Total
Lunch	2 years	Diced peaches	0.125 cup	x	12	=	1.5 cups



*Required Minimum Amounts

See USDA Team Nutrition's "Serve Tasty and Healthy Food in the Child and Adult Care Food Program" posters for required minimum amounts of meal components. Find them at TeamNutrition.USDA.gov.



Fraction and Decimal Chart

Use this chart as a quick reference for fractions and decimals that meet minimum serving size amounts in the CACFP.

$\frac{1}{8}$	=	0.125
$\frac{1}{4}$	=	0.25
$\frac{1}{2}$	=	0.5
$\frac{3}{4}$	=	0.75

Calculate the Amount of Food for Different Age Groups

There are three steps to follow when determining the total amount of food to offer during meals and snacks to children from **different age groups** (such as 1-through 2-year olds and 3-through 5-year olds).

- 1 Determine the minimum** amount of food needed for children in each age group at the meal or snack. See “Required Minimum Amounts” on page 7.
- 2 Multiply** the minimum amount of food (from Step One) by the number of children at the meal or snack **separately for each age group**.
- 3 Add** the amounts of food for each age group (from Step Two) to see the total amount to provide.

Example:

Happy Day Child Care wants to offer diced peaches at lunch to the mixed-age classroom. This classroom has six 2-year olds and six 3-year olds.

- 1 Determine the minimum** amount of food needed for each age group at the meal or snack.

- The minimum amount of fruit needed at lunch for each 2-year old is $\frac{1}{8}$ cup (or **0.125 cup**).
- The minimum amount of fruit needed at lunch for each 3-year old is $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (or **0.25 cup**).

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child
Lunch	2 years	Diced peaches	0.125 cup
Lunch	3 years	Diced peaches	0.25 cup

- 2 Multiply** the minimum amount of food (from Step One) by the number of children at the meal or snack **separately for each age group**.

- 0.125 cup of diced peaches x **6** children = **0.75 cup** ($\frac{3}{4}$ cup) of diced peaches
- 0.25 cup of diced peaches x **6** children = **1.5 cups** ($1\frac{1}{2}$ cups) of diced peaches

Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals	Minimum Amount to Provide
x	6	=	0.75 cup
x	6	=	1.5 cups

- 3 Add** the amounts of food for each age group (from Step Two) to see the total amount to provide.

- 0.75 cup + 1.5 cups = 2.25 cups** ($2\frac{1}{4}$ cups) of diced peaches

Total	2.25 cups
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Happy Day Child Care should provide at least 2.25 cups ($2\frac{1}{4}$ cups) of diced peaches to the mixed-age classroom that day. The 2.25 cups of diced peaches can be placed in one serving bowl with the appropriate size serving spoons if all 12 children are sitting at one table. If they are sitting at more than one table, split the 2.25 cups into smaller bowls that may be easier for children to hold and pass at each table.

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child	Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals	Minimum Amount to Provide
Lunch	2 years	Diced peaches	0.125 cup	x	6	=	0.75 cup
Lunch	3 years	Diced peaches	0.25 cup	x	6	=	1.5 cups
Total							2.25 cups



Determining How Much Food to Purchase

Let the Food Buying Guide Calculator help you determine how much food to purchase. For more information, check out a training video at fns.usda.gov/tn/navigating-food-buying-guide-fbg-calculator.



How is Family Style Meal Service Different for Older Children (6-18 Year Olds)?

If your site serves older children, like in an afterschool program, you can implement family style meal service the same way you would with younger children. Here are a few things to consider when serving older children:



Serving and eating utensils may be “adult-size” depending on the age and developmental abilities of the children.



CACFP meal pattern requirements are different for children 6–18 years old compared to younger age groups.



Tip! Preparing for Spills, Contamination, and Offering More Food

If you prepare more food than is required by the meal pattern, you do not have to put that extra food on the table where the children are sitting. You may want to keep the food on another table or cart close by, or in the kitchen. This way, you can ensure the full portion is on the table for each child, but can quickly replace a serving bowl or plate of food if more is needed. Check with your sponsoring organization or State agency about using CACFP funds to buy extra food.



How Do I Accommodate Special Dietary Needs?

A child may have special dietary needs due to a disability, including a food allergy, which may require a meal modification. Or, there may be circumstances where a parent/guardian requests a special diet due to religious or cultural practices, or dietary preference(s). In these cases, food substitutions may be pre-plated on the child's plate and the remaining meal components may be passed around "family style." The required steps and documentation for these dietary needs are discussed below.

Accommodate Disabilities

CACFP operators are required to make modifications to meals or meal service to accommodate disabilities, including food allergies.

- If the meal modification cannot be made within the meal pattern requirements, ask the parent/guardian for a signed medical statement to keep on file in a secure location at the site. The medical statement must include:
 - The food to be avoided (allergen),
 - A brief explanation of how exposure to the food affects the participant, and
 - Recommended substitute(s).
- Always check with parents/guardians and follow your site and the child's food allergy plan, Individualized Education Program or 504 plan about necessary meal modification(s) before preparing the meal.

Please note: If you have a child that can only eat certain foods, for example gluten-free foods, consider the risk of cross-contact during meal service with the serving spoons and tongs. It may be safer to have their full meal pre-plated to ensure that cross-contact does not occur.

For more information, see "Policy Memorandum on Modifications to Accommodate Disabilities in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and Summer Food Service Program" at fns.usda.gov/cn/modifications-accommodate-disabilities-cacfp-and-sfsp.



Special Dietary Modifications

CACFP operators are encouraged to make modifications to meals or meal service, even when it is not required. These modifications must meet the CACFP meal pattern requirements. Requests of this type are often due to religious or cultural practices, or dietary preference(s).

Scenario:

A family requests their child not receive cow's milk.

Option:

Operator provides a list of non-dairy beverages to the family that are creditable in the CACFP and can be offered as a fluid milk substitute.

Solution:

- Operator works with the family to determine the best substitute that meets their family's preferences.
- The parent/guardian provides a written request to document preferences. This documentation is kept in a secure location at the site.



Supporting Children at Mealtime

How Can I Help Children Learn to Serve Themselves?

Family style meals provide a great opportunity for children to practice their fine motor skills—strengthening the small muscles in their hands and fingers. These skills are needed for many daily activities, including serving food at mealtime. To help children serve themselves, you can:

Allow Children to Practice On Their Own

If they need help, you can use the hand-over-hand method (place your hand over their hand on the serving spoon) to guide them.









Accept It May Be Messy at First

It will take practice for children to serve themselves family style, and it may be messy at first. But the mess is worth the benefits for children. Try these tips to cut down on the mess:

- Put a towel or paper under the children’s chairs.
- Teach children to clean up their mess.
- Let children continue to practice strengthening their skills—which will eventually lead to creating less mess.

Choose Foods That Are Easier to Scoop

Here are a few substitutions to consider that may make it easier for young children to serve themselves (and create less mess).

Instead Of...		Try...
	→	
Spaghetti noodles		Macaroni noodles
	→	
Thin soups		Thick chili*
	→	
Whole chicken tenderloin		Diced or shredded chicken

*Cook foods, such as beans, until they are soft enough to pierce with a fork to reduce the risk of choking.

“Family style makes the children more independent, responsible, and they feel like they are at home. Or in rare cases if children don’t do that at home, then they get that opportunity here at school.”

— Child Care Center in Arizona

How Can I Encourage Good Food Safety Habits?

A lot goes into mealtime food safety. It begins with proper food handling and holding, taking and recording food temperatures, cleaning and sanitizing surfaces, and personal health and hygiene. Food safety training and resources that cover these topics can be found at the Institute of Child Nutrition theicn.org/icn-resources-a-z/food-safety. Always follow State or local health safety codes and regulations while serving meals family style.

For family style meal service, it's especially important to:

- Use hot holding bags or coolers to keep foods at the proper temperature during transport and storage.
- Have children and adults wash their hands before the start of the meal or snack.
- Encourage children to follow the rules to keep everyone safe at mealtime. Pre-plate a child's meal if a child is sick or has an open wound.
- Make sure the foods served for children age 4 and younger are modified to reduce the risk of choking. This may include cutting foods into smaller pieces. For more information on choking hazards, check out USDA Team Nutrition's training worksheet, "Reducing the Risk of Choking in Young Children at Mealtimes," at fns.usda.gov/tn/reducing-risk-choking-young-children-mealtimes.

“ Family style dining usually brings more interaction and conversation to the table during meals. ”

– Family Child Care Home in Indiana



Tip! Use Different Colors for the Serving and Eating Utensils and Dishes

Try using a different color for the serving utensils and dishes and the eating utensils and dishes. For example, use yellow-colored eating utensils and red-colored serving utensils. This may help remind children not to lick the red serving spoon or eat from the red serving bowl or plate.

If you cannot practice family style meal service, like during a public health emergency, aspects of this style of meal service can still be used. Help children continue to practice language and social skills by encouraging conversation and good table manners even when food is pre-plated.

How Can I Encourage Children to Try New Foods?

Family style meals allow children to choose if and how much food they want on their plate. This gives them more control and may lead to them trying a new food. You can encourage children by introducing new foods in different ways and by being a role model.

You can introduce a new food:

- Outside of mealtime through reading, gardening, and food activities.
- One at a time so children are not overwhelmed.
- At mealtime with a food they like.
- In taste testing activities outside of mealtime. This may allow children, especially those with sensory challenges, to try a food with less pressure.



Tip! Keep Trying

If a child does not want to try the new food, that's okay! You may need to offer a food more than 10 times before a child might like it.

Be a Role Model

Role modeling at mealtime is an important piece of family style meal service. Sit down with the children at mealtime, and if you can, eat the same foods as the children. The supervising adult's meals are not reimbursable, but the expense of extra creditable food produced for meals is an allowable cost. Check with your sponsoring organization or State agency about using CACFP funds to buy extra food.

Have more adventurous eaters sit next to children that need a bit more encouragement.

“When I began sitting with [children] and eating meals with them, our whole dynamic changed. The picky eaters began tasting foods that they would not have.”

— Family Child Care Home in Arkansas

Food Allergy Reminder

Always check with parents/guardians and follow both your child care site's food allergy plan (if applicable) and the individual child's food allergy plan before offering a new food. It is recommended to share copies of menus before meals are served so parents/guardians can ask questions and raise any potential concerns. For more information on accommodating food allergies, see page 10.



Get inspired by conversation starters and more on USDA Team Nutrition's "Let's Talk at Mealtime" poster. Find it at TeamNutrition.USDA.gov.

Practicing What You Have Learned

Practice Your Understanding

1. Abracadabra Child Care practices family style meal service. They have sixteen 5-year olds in attendance in Ms. Smith’s classroom today. They want to offer cooked peas at lunch. What is the total amount of cooked peas that must be in the serving bowl(s) on the table?

Use the chart below to help you determine the correct amount.

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child	Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals...	Total
			_____ cups	x		=	_____ cups

2. Magical Day Child Care has a mixed-age group classroom and practices family style meal service. They have four 2-year olds and four 3-year olds in attendance today. They are serving fat-free (skim) milk at breakfast. What is the total amount of milk they must put in the pitcher on the table?

Use the chart below to help you determine the correct amount.

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child	Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals...	Minimum Amount to Provide
			_____ cups	x		=	_____ cups
			_____ cups	x		=	_____ cups
						Total	_____ cups

3. Play & Learn Child Care served spinach at lunch and provided the full required minimum amount in the serving bowl for each of the three children at the table. Johnny did not put any on his plate. Mya put some on her plate. Finn put the full minimum amount on his plate. None of them ate everything they put on their plates. Are all three meals reimbursable?
4. Mary did not want to start family style meal service at her child care site because she thought it “wasted too much food.” Tim was already practicing family style meal service at his child care site and saw many benefits. What do you think Tim said to Mary that convinced her to practice family style meal service at her child care site?

1. Abracadabra Child Care must provide at least 4 cups of cooked peas in the serving bowl(s) at lunch to the 5-year olds in Ms. Smith's classroom. The 4 cups of peas can be split into smaller bowls that may be easier for the children to hold and pass at each table. See page 7 for more information.

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child	Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals...	Total
Lunch	5 years	Cooked peas	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup (0.25 cup)	x	16	=	4 cups

2. Magical Day Child Care must provide at least 5 cups (40 fl oz) of fat-free (skim) milk in the pitcher(s) at breakfast to the mixed-age classroom. Tip: The 5 cups (40 fl oz) of milk can be placed in one pitcher or can be divided into two or more pitchers that may be easier for children to hold, pass, and pour. See page 8 for more information.

Meal	Age of the Children	Food Item	Required Minimum Amount per Child	Multiplied by...	Number of Participants	Equals...	Minimum Amount to Provide
Breakfast	2 years	Fat-free (skim) milk	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (0.5 cup) 4 fl oz*	x	4	=	2 cups (16 fl oz)*
Breakfast	3 years	Fat-free (skim) milk	$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (0.75 cup) 6 fl oz*	x	4	=	3 cups (24 fl oz)*

*fl oz = fluid ounces

3. Yes. All three of the meals are reimbursable. The child care site must provide enough food so that each child has the option to take the full minimum amount of food if they wish. However, they are not required to take or eat the full amount for the meal or snack to be reimbursable.

4. Answers may include:

- Food waste can be cut down by using the Food Buying Guide Calculator to calculate the correct amount of food to purchase, prepare, and serve. See page 8.
- Measuring cups are used as serving spoons to ensure each child is offered the correct portion. See page 3.

Tim may have also expressed his happiness that the children are benefiting by eating based on their ability to serve themselves and make choices while also listening to their body's signs of hunger and fullness. See page 2 for a full list of benefits.



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