



# Nutrition for Family Living

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## March, 2008 Topics

Mealtimes in child care centers

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### Mealtimes in child care centers

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Susan Nitzke

Since more than half of children 3-5 years of age in the U.S. attend center-based child care, child-care staff play an important role in influencing children's development of healthy eating habits. A multi-state team of researchers from four Western states described mealtimes and explored routines, policies and training in 568 licensed child-care centers. They found:

- Meals tended to be served in classrooms (73%)
- At least one adult usually sat at the table with the children (56%)
- An adult usually served some or all of the food, poured the drinks, and ate some of the food provided by the center
- Less than half of the centers (38%) reported using family-style service which has been recommended to help children learn to control the type and amount of food on their plates according to their level of hunger
- Child care staff were less likely to have been trained on feeding children (42%) than they were to have had training on nutrition (68%) and child development (95%)

Implications for Extension Educators. The importance of serving family-style meals, sitting with children, serving as role models, communicating about food and eating, and enabling children to learn and master skills that are necessary for healthful development are important for all adults who play significant roles in young children's lives. Parents and child-care providers can and should help children learn to eat well and develop healthy eating attitudes and behaviors. Extension educators may address these needs in many ways. For example, Extension parenting and nutrition programs may help parents recognize the importance of considering meal policies as they evaluate options and select child care facilities.

Reference:

Sigman-Grant M, Christiansen E, Branen L, Fletcher J, Johnson S. About feeding children: mealtimes in child-care centers in four Western states. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2008;108:340-346.

Resources:

*Nibbles for Health* newsletters such as #5 on "Child care: What will my child eat?" and #16 on "Teaching good food habits." This Team Nutrition resource\* is available at: <http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/nibbles.html>.

*Making Nutrition Count for Children - Nutrition Guidance for Child Care Homes.* This packet of materials\* is available online at: <http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/nutritioncount.html>.

\*Note that both of the above Team Nutrition resources contain some sections that need to be updated for the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid.



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Benchmarks for nutrition programs in child care settings. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2005;105:979-986.  
Available online (non-printable) at

[http://www.eatright.org/cps/rde/xchg/ada/hs.xsl/advocacy\\_1731\\_ENU\\_HTML.htm](http://www.eatright.org/cps/rde/xchg/ada/hs.xsl/advocacy_1731_ENU_HTML.htm)