



Family Style Meals:

A New Way to Teach Healthy Eating Habits

Family style meal service can help achieve two of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) important goals: provide nutritious meals to children and help children develop healthy eating habits. Family style meal service allows site staff and children to eat together, creates a relaxing eating environment, and promotes healthy eating habits and attitudes toward food.

What is family style meal service?

When choosing to serve meals family style, all the foods needed to meet the meal pattern requirements are placed in serving plates or bowls on a table and children serve themselves or serve themselves with some help from site staff.

The Benefits of Serving Meals Family Style

There are many benefits that children and site staff enjoy when serving meals family style. Some of these include:

- Children learn and practice social and motor skills such as taking turns, sharing, and passing, pouring and scooping foods;
- Children may choose to take smaller portions of food and know they can take seconds if they want. The Institute of Medicine recommends serving meals family style because it creates a healthful eating environment that is responsive to children's hunger and fullness cues;
- Children are encouraged to try new foods by seeing other children and adults eating the them;
- Site staff act as good role models for children by sitting at the same table and eating the same meal as the children;
- Site staff and children can enjoy pleasant conversation with each other; and
- Creates an intimate, sharing, family-like environment.

How to Serve Meals Family Style

Camps and closed enrolled summer sites have the option of serving meals family style because these settings provide a stable environment. This option is not allowed at open and open restricted SFSP and Seamless Summer Option sites.

Family style meal service offers sponsors flexibility in the initial serving sizes of the food placed on the table. However, sponsors must use this flexibility while following these practices:

1. Enough food must be prepared and placed on each table to allow for the minimum portion size of all required meal components for all children at the table and to accommodate any site staff if they eat with the children.





2. Some amount of each required meal component must be placed on each child's plate and at least the minimum regulatory portion must be offered to the child. This practice may be particularly valuable when children are being introduced to new and unfamiliar foods.
3. When a child does not initially take the full portion size required by regulations, site staff is responsible for actively encouraging the child to take the full portion size during the course of the meal.

Tips for Serving Meals Family Style

- Have all the food placed on the table at the beginning of the meal;
- Think about children's ability to serve themselves. Some children may need more help than others, especially younger children. Seat those children near site staff. Start by letting children serve themselves something easy such as a piece of bread, then gradually increase the number and variety of foods they serve themselves;
- Expects spills and show children how to handle them;
- Encourage children to try new foods and praise them when they do;
- Make positive statements when discussing the food and meal and encourage children to do the same. Avoid using negative or pressuring statements;
- Provide adequate time for all children to finish eating;
- Demonstrate good table manners and healthy eating; and
- Start a conversation with the children at the table.

Food Safety Considerations

There are a few food safety concerns sponsors should be aware of when serving meals family style. It is important to:

- Keep food at the proper temperatures;
- Use appropriate and clean containers and utensils to serve the meal; and
- Make sure all site staff and children wash their hands.

Sponsors must make sure they know and follow their State or local health requirements for serving meals family style to prevent any possible food safety issues.

USDA Resources:

Regulations and Policies

- **SFSP Regulations: Meal service requirements, 7 CFR 225.16**
http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=d87b1089e455f65409bd1dbf463b3686&node=pt7.4.225&rgn=div5#se7.4.225_116
- **Meal Service Requirements, SP 13-2015 (v.2), SFSP 05-2015 (v.2), Summer Meal Programs Meal Service Requirements Revised Q&As- Revised, January 12, 2015**





<http://www.fns.usda.gov/summer-meal-programs-meal-service-requirements-gas-revised>

Handbooks and Other Tools

- **Nutrition Guidance for Sponsors**
This handbook made just for sponsors includes nutrition tips and tips on how to serve family style meals.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/NutritionGuide.pdf>
- **Innovative Strategies: Meal Service**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/best-practices-meal-service>

Toolkit pages

- **How to Establish Meal Service Times**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-MealServiceTimes.pdf>
- **How to Use Offer Versus Serve**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-OfferVersusServe.pdf>
- **Serving Adults: What You Need to Know**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-AdultMeals.pdf>
- **What to Do with Leftover Meals**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-LeftoverMeals.pdf>
- **Successfully Operating a Congregate Feeding Site**
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cnd/SMT-CongregateFeeding.pdf>

Team Nutrition

- Find resources about family style meal service and other tips to create a positive eating environment here: <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/cacfp-wellness-resources-child-care-providers/feeding-environment/feeding-environment>

Partner Resources:

- The National Food Service Management Institute provides several tip sheets explain what family style meal service is and how to successfully do it in your program:
 - **The Basic Guide to Family Style Dining- Part 1,**
<http://www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20130815085751.pdf>
 - **Planning and Preparing: Family Style Dining- Part 2,**
<http://www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20131004114651.pdf>
 - **Happy Meal Times with Family Style Meals,**
<http://www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20100917032729.pdf>





Additional Information

Sponsors and the general public should contact the appropriate State agency for additional guidance. State agencies should contact their FNS Regional Office for additional guidance.

List of FNS Regional Offices: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns-regional-offices>

List of State Agencies: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Contacts/StateDirectory.htm>

USDA and its recipient institutions share responsibility for compliance and oversight to ensure good stewardship of Federal Funds.

