

USDA INFANT AND PRESCHOOL MEAL PATTERN IN SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS



Family Style Meal Service

Family style meal service aligns well with the nutritional goals of the preschool meal pattern. Family style meal service encourages a pleasant eating environment and promotes mealtime as a learning experience by allowing children to serve themselves from common platters or bowls of food. It also allows children to be introduced to new foods, new tastes, and new menus, while developing a positive attitude toward healthy foods, sharing in group eating situations, and developing good eating habits.

Overview of Family Style Meal Service

- Enough of each food must be placed on each table to provide each student and supervising adult (if eating with the children) with the full required serving size.
- Students pass communal bowls and pitchers around the table, serving themselves.
- Students must be allowed to select the components and initial serving sizes.
- Supervising adults are responsible for actively encouraging each student to serve themselves the full required serving size of each component.
- Meals are considered reimbursable if students are seated at the table and serve themselves *at least ¼ cup fruit, vegetable, or a combination.*



Other Considerations

- Supervising staff should encourage students to take all components in at least the minimum serving size for their age group, but not force selections.
- Choosing to eat with students is a great way for supervising staff to model positive mealtime behaviors. When doing so, staff should only take the serving size planned for the students.
- Meal counts should be taken after all students are seated at the table and have been served foods to ensure they have selected *at least ¼ cup of fruit, vegetable, or a combination.*
- Family style meal service may be used for some or all of the foods offered to students. If any foods are served to students by a supervising adult, these foods must be served in the *full required serving size* for the students' age.
- Additional servings should be readily available in the event of spills.
- Allow children to take second servings after everyone has been served.



Benefits of Family Style Meal Service

The benefits of family style meal service are many. Some of these benefits include:

- Students are encouraged to try new foods in a serving size that they choose.
- Students are able to self-regulate their eating and tune into their own hunger and fullness cues.
- Children practice social skills by learning to take turns, share, and politely ask for or turn down foods. The opportunity for positive meal time conversation builds social skills.
- Students develop motor skills by passing, pouring, and scooping foods at the table.

Encouraging Words and Conversation Starters

Pleasant mealtime conversation is an important aspect of meal service. A few ideas for conversation with students during the mealtime include:

- Commending students for trying foods
- Discussing where food items come from, such as the garden or farm
- Describing the sensory characteristics of food items such as the color, texture, or taste
- Teaching students about the health benefits of the foods they select
- Asking students which food was their favorite

Be Prepared

Some additional preparation may be required for family style meal service. Consider the following:

- Purchase child-size, light weight serving utensils and small pitchers to help children with serving their own foods.
- Extra serving utensils should be available. Children may stick a serving utensil in their mouth or drop a utensil on the floor during meal service so, extra utensils should be readily available.
- Extra time may be needed for clean-up and dish washing. Consider keeping small size sponges and buckets available so that students may assist with cleaning up spills that may occur during meal service.
- Have a plan in place to ensure food is safely transported from the kitchen to the classroom and served in a timely manner.
- Know what to do with leftover food. Any food that is left in bowls or pitchers should be discarded after meal service.



For more information, visit the [Infants and Preschool in NSLP and SBP](#) webpage.