

# Parent Aware Tip Sheets

## Safety of Meals and Snacks

### What is the role of safety during meal and snack times?

Young children need nourishing meals and snacks to fuel their play and to support growth and development. Providing nourishing meals and snacks is a basic responsibility of caregivers. When planning for meals and snacks, caregivers must consider nutrition as well as safety. Improperly handled food is not only less nourishing, it can be harmful to children's health.

### Food Preparation and Service

In order to provide safe and healthy meals and snacks, a number of precautions must be in place during food preparation and food service:

- The area where food is prepared is clean and sanitized.
- Caregivers preparing food, even warming food brought from children's homes, are in good health and must wash hands prior to preparing food.
- Utensils and dishes used in food preparation and food service are clean. They are washed in hot water and sanitized.
- Foods are properly stored, including food children bring from home. Hot foods are kept hot (at least 140 degrees F) and cold foods are kept cold (no more than 40 degrees F).
- All fruits and vegetables are washed before serving.
- Frozen food is thawed in the refrigerator.
- Refrigerated food is served as soon as it is removed from the refrigerator, including milk.

### Allergies

Food allergies can have potentially dangerous effects for young children. Young children may have allergies to food that they are unaware of or cannot communicate to their caregivers. Therefore it is critical to follow a few simple guidelines to minimize the potential impacts of food allergies:

- Obtain training to recognize and react to the signs of an allergic reaction. This training is typically included in a first aid course.
- Collect information from the families about known or suspected allergies at the time of enrollment.
- Document allergies in the area where children's food is prepared and served. Be sure all adults interacting with children are aware of any allergies.
- Notify families frequently of any foods that may not be served or brought to the program. For example, if the program is "nut free" frequently remind families about which nuts and nut-based products cannot be brought to the program.
- When allergies are known, gather information from the child's physician about allergies, potential reactions, and medications appropriate for treatment of allergies.
- Regularly update information about children's health, including allergies.
- Sit with children during meals and snacks. This practice allows caregivers to watch for allergic reactions.

The most common food allergies among young children are cow's milk, eggs, soybeans, wheat, peanuts, tree nuts (cashews, almonds, pecans and walnuts), fish and shellfish. However, children can potentially be allergic to nearly any food.

## Choking Hazards

Young children are prone to choking while eating because they are still learning to consume solid foods and because their grinding teeth may not be well developed. Also, children are not always good at judging the amount of food they are consuming in one bite. Therefore, caregivers must employ a few simple precautions to prevent choking and the dangerous effects of choking.

- Obtain training on recognizing and responding to a choking emergency. This training is typically part of a first aid course.
- Remove skin from meats.
- Chop, grind or dice meats.
- Dice, grate or steam raw vegetables.
- Remove the pits from fruits.
- Cut meats, fruits, vegetables, etc., into very small pieces. Infant food should be smaller than ¼ inch chunks. Toddler foods should be cut into pieces smaller than ½ inch.
- Cut hot dogs, carrots, and other tube-shaped foods lengthwise before cutting into pieces. Avoid foods shaped like 'coins' or 'discs.'
- Avoid foods that are round, hard, sticky or thick. These foods present the biggest choking hazards.
- Serve small portions and refill children's plates or bowls as they finish each portion.
- Serve liquids along with meals.
- Model and encourage slow eating and thorough chewing.
- Sit with children while they are eating, including infants in high chairs, to monitor for signs of choking.

## Feeding Infants

Infants and toddlers who are using bottles and eating special foods present some additional challenges for food preparation and food service.

### Bottles

- Bottles need to be labeled with the child's name and the date. Labeling helps to ensure that the bottle is fed to the right child.
- Empty and unused bottles should be returned to families at the end of each day.
- Once a bottle has been taken out of the refrigerator it should be used immediately. Once a bottle has been given to a child, any unused or remaining portion should be discarded within an hour. Bottles should not be saved and reheated. Encourage families to provide a greater number of small bottles to avoid waste.
- Microwave ovens should not be used to heat bottles. They heat unevenly. Consider a UL approved bottle warmer or secured slow cooker kept out of the reach of children.
- Caregivers should hold infants and engage them in conversation or interaction while feeding them. Bottles should not be propped in a child's mouth.
- Children should never be put to bed with a bottle. This practice promotes rapid tooth decay.

### Solid foods

- Communicate with families prior to introducing infant cereal or baby foods, follow their preferences. Give parents information about your feeding policies and procedures at the time of enrollment.
- Introduce one food at a time, typically five to seven days apart.
- Individual jars of food should be labeled with children's names and the date.

- Follow food preparation instructions for infant cereals and foods that are mixed.
- To minimize the risks of cross contamination do not feed infants food directly from the jar. Place a small portion on a plate or bowl and add more food as needed. Do not use feeding spoons to take more food out of containers as they are contaminated with children's saliva. Never return uneaten food to the jar.
- Once children can eat sitting up, use a high chair or low chair.

#### Finger foods

- Partner with families prior to introducing finger foods. Understand and follow parents' preferences.
- Inspect all finger foods for potential choking hazards.
- Before serving finger foods, clean and sanitize surfaces used for eating.
- Sit with infants and toddlers while they are eating finger foods.
- Feed finger foods at a table with a high chair or low chair. Do not allow children to walk around the program while eating finger foods.