

Passing bowls family-style teaches day-care kids to respond to hunger cues, fights obesity

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When children and child-care providers sit around a table together at mealtime, passing bowls and serving themselves, children learn to recognize when they are full better than they do when food is pre-plated for them, reports a new University of Illinois study of feeding practices of two- to five-year-old children in 118 child-care centers.

"Family-style meals give kids a chance to learn about things like portion size and food preferences. When foods are pre-plated, children never develop the ability to read their body's hunger cues. They don't learn to say, okay, this is an appropriate [portion size](#) for me," said Brent McBride, director of the U of I Child Development Laboratory and lead author of the study.

The study found that Head Start centers were in significantly greater compliance with this and other Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics benchmarks than other centers surveyed, including participants in the USDA's supplemental nutrition assistance program CACFP, and non-CACFP state-licensed centers.

The academy's benchmarks were issued in 2011 to combat the problem of child obesity. One in four preschool children is overweight or obese, and more than 12 million preschoolers consume up to five meals or snacks daily at the nation's child-care centers, McBride said.

"The academy also recommends that providers eat with children so they can model healthy behaviors, which Head Start staff are required to do,"

said Dipti A. Dev, a U of I graduate student in nutritional sciences.

Teachers are also asked not to pressure children to take one or two more bites or finish a serving before another food or activity is offered, she said.

The researchers said that providers need to help children recognize their feelings of hunger and fullness.

"Instead of asking Are you done? teachers should ask children, Are you full? Or they should say, If you're hungry, you can have some more, explained Dev, who is developing a packet of best feeding practices to share with providers.

"Asking the right questions can help children listen to their hunger and satiety signals," she said.

The Illinois research is the first study to evaluate whether child-care providers are adhering to the academy's guidelines for feeding practices. Most providers did promote healthy feeding by serving nutritious foods and not pressuring children to eat or restricting them from eating. Head Start programs stood out though as having the best policies and [feeding practices](#).

In fact, Head Start teachers who use family-style meals are strong advocates for them, the researchers said.

"Teachers who don't do family-style meals have all these reasons that they don't: there's too much waste, it's messy, young kids don't have the developmental skills—the fine motor control—to do that," McBride said.

"But Head Start teachers were telling us ways you could help develop

those fine motor skills: for instance, using scoops in the sandbox or pouring water in the water table," he added.

"When you first do easel painting with a two-year-old, it's really messy because they don't have fine motor control, but you still do it even though it's messy. The same thing is true for family-style meal service. It may be messy at first until they develop the appropriate skills and learn to pour the right way or hold the cup as they're pouring. It's a developmental progression," he said.

If children don't want to eat, teachers shouldn't urge them to eat anyway out of concern that the kids may get hungry before the next meal or snack is served, he said.

"If a child doesn't eat at one meal, he'll compensate for it over a 24-hour period. Making kids eat when they're not hungry is probably the worst thing you can do. It teaches them not to pay attention to their body's signals," Dev said.

More information: "Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Benchmarks for Nutrition in Child Care 2011: Are Child-Care Providers across Contexts Meeting Recommendations?" was published in the October 2013 issue of the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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