

# Feeding Behaviors and Language Development

Early childhood is full of learning opportunities through everyday exploration within routines. During the first few years of life (ages 0-5), a child develops skills across multiple domains including motor, cognitive (thinking, problem-solving, and learning), social-emotional (playing and interacting), communication, and adaptive (self-help skills). The following tip-sheet is intended for providers in early childhood and the families they serve to increase their ability to promote positive feeding behaviors (an adaptive skill) and receptive-expressive language (a communication skill) through mealtimes routines.

## Teaching Vocabulary During Mealtime:

- In many cultures, mealtimes are a highly interactive and interpersonal routine in a toddler's daily life. The natural back-and-forth nature of feeding/eating provides a platform to teach receptive (what the child understands) and expressive (what the child uses) language skills
- It is important to match a child's language level when giving directions or making comments during mealtimes so they can effectively follow directions and successfully imitate the words spoken by the adult. Consider the "one-up" rule:
  - Add one more word to your own phrase than what the child typically uses. If the toddler currently puts two words together as in "more milk," model 3-word phrases such as "more milk please."

**Establish a Mealtime Routine: Children learn language and other skills through repetitive, predictable routines. Consider the following mealtime routine:**

### 1) Wash hands & sit in high chair.

- Ideas for language to add: "wash hands," "clean," "up," "sit down," "waiting," "time to eat."

### 2) Time to eat!

- Ideas for language to add:

"eat," "bite," "lick," "smell," "put on," "more \_\_\_\_ (banana, cookie, etc.)"

- provide simple first/then directions as in "First, eat apple. Then, eat cookie."

### 3) Clean up!

- Help the child understand they are "all done" by keeping the clean-up routine consistent.



Make Vocabulary Interactive!		
<b>Nouns (person, place, or thing)</b>	<p>-visual and concrete, nouns are often the first words children learn</p> <p>- powerful to help children request their desired food</p>	<p><b>Food Vocabulary:</b> model the names of foods during mealtime by labeling (i.e. strawberry, milk, cracker, etc.) Offer choices to the child using nouns so they can interact and make a choice (i.e. “milk or juice?”).</p> <p><b>Utensils and Household Items:</b> Model the names of objects involved in feeding (i.e. fork, spoon, plate, chair, high chair, table, napkin etc.)</p> <p><b>Mealtime Routines:</b> Model the names of the routine themselves! (i.e. breakfast, lunch, dinner, snack, etc.)</p>
<b>Verbs (action words)</b>	<p>- verbs expand the child’s ability to effectively communicate in order to request and comment during mealtimes, as well as understand spoken directions</p>	<p>Model actions during mealtime and give them a name! Increase the child’s understanding of verbs and how they can be combined with nouns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- i.e. Bite, lick, sniff, kiss, suck, touch, look, eat, drink, share, cut, poke, scoop, wash, cook, bake, blend, mix, etc.</li> </ul> <p>Provide simple spoken directions to increase the child’s ability to successfully follow directions during meals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “eat banana,” “cut hotdog,” “wash apple,” “bite sandwich”</li> </ul>
<b>Adjectives (description words)</b>	<p>-incorporate food exploration into mealtime to expose children to new sensory experiences</p>	<p>Model adjectives during mealtimes in order to:</p> <p><b>Describe the food:</b> cold, hot, sticky, wet, slimy, crunchy, spicy, sweet, salty, etc.</p> <p><b>Describe preferences:</b> yucky, yummy, icky, etc.</p> <p><b>Describe how the child feels:</b> hungry, thirsty, full, empty, etc.</p>
<b>Quantifiers (how much?)</b>	<p>-use quantifiers to convey expectations during a meal and improve the child’s ability to request</p>	<p>Quantifiers are useful to help the child request as in “more milk” or “all gone!” An understanding of quantifiers can help the child understand what is being asked of them, “eat 2 more berries then all done.”</p> <p><b>Examples of quantifiers:</b> all, all gone, a lot, none, some, more, etc.</p>
<b>Prepositions (where?)</b>	<p>-an understanding of prepositions helps children follow directions</p>	<p><b>Examples of prepositions:</b> in, inside, off, on, out, behind, under, etc.</p> <p>Examples of spoken directions involving prepositions: “Put the apple in your mouth,” “Take off the bib,” “It fell under the table.”</p>

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