MEALTIME OVERVIEW: WHY MEALTIME MATTERS AND COMMON CHALLENGES

Module Overview

Total Time: 25 minutes

Learning Objectives
• Understand the significance of mealtime.
• Recall why mealtime is particularly important for infant and child development.
• Identify common mealtime challenges.
• Describe why mealtime challenges occur.

Topics
2.1 Why Mealtime Matters
2.2 Why Mealtime Matters to Infant and Child Development
2.3 Common Mealtime Challenges

Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPPLIES</th>
<th>ACTIVITY SHEETS</th>
<th>HANDOUTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o PowerPoint Slides</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Flip Chart</td>
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<td>o Markers</td>
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Prerequisites
• Module 1 (Nourished and Thriving Children Overview)
### WHY MEALTIME MATTERS

#### 2.1

**Supplies:**
- PowerPoint slides

**Activity Sheets:**
- None

**Handouts:**
- None

### Learning Objectives

Understand the significance of mealtime.

### Learning Activities

#### Introduction
- Tell the group that you are going to talk about mealtime, why it matters, and common challenges.

#### Stand Up If Activity
- Introduce “Stand Up If” activity by telling the group that the next activity will help answer the following question:
  - Why is mealtime important?
- Ask the group to stand up if the following statements are true for them:
  - You like kale.
  - Your favorite fruit is strawberries.
  - You like more jelly than peanut butter on your PB&J sandwich.
  - You like olives on your pizza.
  - You like pistachio ice cream.
- Allow participants to sit back down. After the final statement, point out how many different tastes there are in the room and note any similarities.
- Tell participants that you are going to play again with the same rules. Ask the group to stand up if the following statements are true for them:
  - Someone you love has ever prepared food in a special way, just for you (e.g., cutting the crusts off bread).
  - You and your family eat a special meal or dish on holidays or special events.
  - You have ever had a birthday cake for your birthday.
  - You have shared a meal or food with someone else in the past year.
- After the final statement, ask participants:
  - What were the differences between the first set of questions and the second set?
  - Was there much variation in responses or did most people have similar experiences and feelings?
  - Did the second set of questions make anyone smile or think of a particular person or time in their life that they want to share?
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<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
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| • Present *Importance of Mealtime* content using the Trainer’s Notes.  
• Facilitate a discussion about how, despite our different food preferences, we all have experiences with love and connection around meals and food. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trainer’s Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Stand Up If” activity note: If standing is difficult for any of the participants, you may ask participants to place their hands on their heads or raise their hands instead. If, at any point, everyone is standing, you can ask them to sit back down and then start again.</td>
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<th>Importance of Mealtime</th>
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| • Food nourishes our bodies, supports our immune system and brain function, and gives us energy—but meals offer us so much more.  
• Mealtimes are about more than just nutrition; they are also about love, care, and connection, and where we learn and share about our families, our communities, and our cultures.  
• Mealtimes throughout our lives can be a chance to share our attention and creativity with others.  
• These feelings of being loved and cared for are what create the most powerful memories and support our physical and mental health.  
• We may not experience this love and connection every time we eat, but every meal with another person is an opportunity for sharing love and for deepening connection. |

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| • Participants will be able to list 2 reasons mealtimes are important to our health.  
• Participants will be able to recall why mealtimes matter beyond the nutrition that comes from the food served. |
### Why Mealtime Matters to Infant and Child Development

| Supplies: | • PowerPoint slides  
|          | • Flip Chart  
|          | • Markers  
| Activity Sheets: | • None  
| Handouts | • None  

#### Learning Objectives
Recall why mealtime is particularly important for infant and child development.

#### Introduction
- Tell the group that you are going to talk about why mealtime is especially important for the overall development of infants and children.

#### Mealtime and Development Group Discussion
- Write the following subtitles on a flip chart: *Infants, Toddlers, and Children.*
- Ask the group:
  - What do infants learn when they are fed?
  - What are toddlers learning when it comes to eating?
  - What are children learning during mealtime?
- Write down some ideas discussed under each subtitle on the flip chart as participants share ideas.

#### Summary
- Use the *Why Mealtime Matters* content in the Trainer’s Notes to build understanding of why mealtime matters for infant and child development in each of these areas:
  - Communication and social development
  - Learning and skill development
  - Caregiver learning and understanding
  - Growth and physical development
  - Nutritional habits
  - Structure and routine
  - School performance

#### Why Mealtime Matters
**Communication and Social Development**
- When a baby cries and the caregiver responds quickly by giving milk or formula, the baby learns that their needs will be met and they are safe, which is also the foundation of attachment, bonding, and love.
- Those first few meals are also the beginning of communication and language. A baby learns, “I make noise, and someone responds to me.”
- A baby also learns that eating makes them feel good—“I get held, my tummy feels better, I feel safe.”
• In positive and supportive environments, children learn social skills and how to be a part of a relationship during mealtime.

Learning and Skill Development
• Mealtime is an opportunity to practice skills for feeding to be able to advance a diet, such as biting, chewing, sucking, and swallowing.
• Kids who experience a regular family meal tend to hear more language spoken, which impacts language development.

Caregiver Learning and Understanding
• For parents, those first few meals are an opportunity to learn how to listen to their baby, how to respond in a caring way, and how to be a parent.

Growth and Physical Development
• Food helps a baby grow, and feeding actually helps the baby develop physically and mentally. As the baby eats, they practice some of the foundational movements that will help them learn to sit up, reach, and grasp big and small objects, as well as how to chew and swallow foods.
• In the first two years of a baby’s life, they are growing faster than they will ever grow in their lives. They need a diet full of healthy foods in order for their bodies and brains to grow fully.

Nutritional Habits
• As they watch their family eat, children learn which foods they are supposed to eat and how to eat them.
• Kids who regularly eat family meals tend to have a more well-rounded diet and more stable weight.

Structure and Routine
• Kids learn rules and boundaries during a meal, and they can learn, with support, to choose healthy foods and take care of themselves.
• Family meals help to organize a child’s day and provide structure, which is shown to help children feel safe and thrive.

School Performance
• Children learn important mental and social skills. They learn to problem solve, be patient, and pay attention, which is probably why kids who experience a regular family meal tend to do better at school.

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<td>Participants will be able to list two reasons mealtime is important for infant development.</td>
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<td>Participants will be able to recall three reasons why mealtime is important for child development.</td>
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### COMMON MEALTIME CHALLENGES

| Supplies: | • PowerPoint slides  
|          | • Flip Chart  
|          | • Markers  
| Activity Sheets: | • None  
| Handouts | • None  

#### Learning Objectives
- Identify common mealtime challenges.
- Describe why mealtime challenges occur.

#### Introduction
- Tell the group that most children are born with the ability to know when they are hungry and when they are full. They naturally, over time and with practice, learn the skills to eat a variety of foods with all kinds of textures, temperatures, and flavors. Explain that, however, this is not always the case and some children and families get off-track for many different reasons. Remind participants that we know that mealtime is so important for infants and children, but many things can get in the way of happy and healthy mealtimes.

#### Common Mealtime Challenges Large Group Discussion
- Ask the group:
  - What are some mealtime challenges that you have experienced or observed with your own children, family members, or friends?
- Write down some ideas discussed on the flip chart as participants share ideas.
- Use the Common Mealtime Challenges list from the Trainer’s Notes to fill in any additional ideas or gaps in the list.

#### Why Mealtime Challenges Occur Small Group Discussion
- Introduce this activity by telling the group that it is not always possible to know all of the reasons that mealtime challenges occur and often it is a mix of more than one reason.
- Present the categories of contributing factors:
  - Developmental Factors—There are many common and developmentally-appropriate reasons that toddlers and children eat in ways that cause mealtime challenges.
  - Medical Factors—Medical issues and factors in infancy or early childhood may contribute to challenging mealtime and feeding behaviors.
  - Social Factors—Social issues in infancy or early childhood can be contributing factors to mealtime challenges.
- Break participants into three groups.
- Assign each group one of the categories of contributing factors.
- Instruct each group to identify at least two to three issues, within their assigned category, that might contribute to mealtime challenges.
• After 3-5 minutes of discussion, ask each group to share one or two ideas they discussed and write them down on a flip chart.
• Use the Why Mealtime Challenges Occur content in the Trainer’s Notes to provide additional information and build understanding of factors that impact mealtime challenges in each category.

Summary
• Synthesize and summarize the conversation to ensure understanding.
• Review Key Takeaways:
  o Mealtime is about more than just nourishment.
  o Mealtime is particularly important to the overall development and well-being of infants and children.
  o Many things can get in the way of happy and healthy mealtimes.
  o Mealtimes can be impacted by a number of developmental, medical, and social factors.

Common Mealtime Challenges
• Picky or selective eating (only eating or asking for snack foods or treat foods, refusing to try new foods)
• Requiring distractions to eat
• Feeding aversion
• Food jags (wanting the same foods at every meal)
• Short-order cooking
• Food refusal
• Food preoccupation
• Throwing food or playing with food
• Eating “too much” or “not enough"
• Mealtime “battles” or tantrums

Common Mealtime Challenges Note: Occasionally, other, more serious challenges are identified, such as eating disorders (anorexia/bulimia), cyclic vomiting, dysphagia, and tube feedings. Those issues are valid and will require professional help and guidance to identify the right resources.

Why Mealtime Challenges Occur
Developmental Factors
• Appetite: A child’s appetite tends to fluctuate from day to day and meal to meal, eating a lot at one meal and almost nothing at the next. We expect children to eat consistently, like a straight line, but their appetites and how much they eat varies greatly.
• Neophobia: It is common for toddlers to go through phases of food “neophobia,” or fear of the new, where they are more anxious and resistant to trying new foods. A typical child may need as many as 15 exposures to a new food before they will accept that food. For children with special needs or who have been exposed to toxic stress, they may require four times as many exposures before they are even willing to let the new food come close to their mouths.
• Food jags: Young children may experience food jags, where they eat only a few foods every day or at many meals in a row, then decide they do not like that food anymore. You may have heard of the child who only eats hot dogs for two weeks. It is normal to show a strong preference for a certain type of food for a period of time. When is it NOT normal? When it impacts health, growth, or social relationships in a negative way.
### Medical Factors

- **Medical history and complications:** For example, if a baby is born prematurely (before 37 weeks gestation), they may have a number of medical complications, like difficulty breathing on their own or eating on their own, or needing to be fed through a tube that is placed in the baby’s nose or mouth all the way down to their stomach. Feeding tubes or breathing tubes can feel very unpleasant or uncomfortable for some babies. These medical factors and unpleasant experiences around the baby’s mouth may lead to long term challenges with feeding and mealtime.

- **Feeding difficulties:** Feeding is a developmental skill that is learned over time and with repeated opportunities to practice. Infants or children may have difficulty learning to take a bottle or breastfeeding, to bite or chew, or the skills needed to advance their diet. If feeding is exhausting, unsafe, or too difficult, children or infants may learn that eating does not feel good. This can lead to more long-term challenges. A child may have developmental delays or sensory challenges that make eating difficult.

- **Pain/discomfort:** Even healthy newborn babies and young children may experience pain or discomfort with eating. For example, when a child with acid reflux or allergies eats, they may experience pain, so they may learn to either eat a small amount (just enough to feel full) or to be selective (picky) about what they choose to eat and when. Even when those medical issues experienced at early stages are “fixed” or outgrown, it can continue to be difficult for children and they may continue to refuse food, eat very small amounts, and/or be very selective about what they eat.

### Social Factors

- **Social factors for foster children:** There are a number of adverse experiences related to food, feeding, and mealtime that may impact feeding skills and mealtime. The child may have lacked regular access to food or enough food, or had to compete with others for enough food. The child may have had to care for and feed siblings and themselves. They may have had limited exposure to different kinds of foods. They may have been fed in unsupportive and developmentally inappropriate ways, been forced to eat, or punished by having food withheld. They may have been offered food to soothe or manage behaviors without the support to learn other coping skills. These experiences can contribute to ongoing challenges with mealtimes, even after the child gains access to safe and reliable food and mealtimes.

- **Stress and stressful interactions:** When there is considerable stress in the household, infants and young children may struggle to eat in a healthy way and may actually fail to gain weight in a typical way because when someone, even a small baby, is stressed or scared, their body tends to shut off hunger and slow down digestion. When stressful interactions take place around the table or mealtime, this may contribute to difficult or picky eating for some infants and children, instead of positive and loving mealtimes.

- **Lack of structured routines:** This could be related to food security, household stress, lack of experience, lack of time, or any number of challenges. Some parents are not familiar with how to set boundaries. Some may be too stressed or busy to set and keep rules. Some have tried, but have given up too quickly. Others have been too rigid at first and then given up quickly when what they were trying didn’t seem to work. Children thrive when given the freedom to operate
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<td>• Participants will recall three common mealtime challenges.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Participants will be able to explain one medical and one social reason why mealtime challenges may occur.</td>
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