ESTABLISHING CONNECTION AND MEALTIME ROUTINES

Module Overview

Total Time: 45 minutes

Learning Objectives

• Discuss the purpose and value of mealtime routines.
• Identify barriers to creating mealtime routines.
• Practice applying strategies to build healthy mealtime routines for children.
• Examine mealtime difficulties and apply strategies to improve the meal.

Topics

6.1 Mealtime Routines
6.2 Establishing Routines & Connection
6.3 When Mealtimes Go Wrong and What to Do

Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPPLIES</th>
<th>ACTIVITY SHEETS</th>
<th>HANDOUTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o PowerPoint slides</td>
<td>o Eating Zones Activity Sheet</td>
<td>o Helpful Phrases Handout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Flip chart</td>
<td>o Conversation Starter Activity Sheet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Markers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Scissors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prerequisite

• Module 2 (Mealtime Overview)
### Supplies
- PowerPoint slides
- Flip chart
- Markers

### Activity Sheets
- None

### Handouts
- None

#### Learning Objectives
Discuss the purpose and value of mealtime routines.

#### Introduction
- Introduce the topic by telling participants that we know that what a child eats is important for growth, development, immunity, and prevention of chronic disease.
- Remind participants about the importance of mealtime.
- Ask participants, “When it comes to meals and eating with children, what does every caregiver want?”
- Tell them that what we want for children at mealtime is:
  - To enjoy a variety of healthy foods
  - To know when they are hungry and when they are full
  - To be comfortable eating anywhere (e.g., home, school, friend’s home, parties)
  - To enjoy eating

#### Mealtime Routines Small Group Brainstorming Activity
- Tell participants that we all might have different ideas about what makes a mealtime or what makes a “good” mealtime routine.
- Have each person write down three things that make for a mealtime or “good” mealtime routine.
- Divide participants into small groups.
- In small groups, have the participants share what each person identified.
- Have the small groups discuss the benefit of mealtime routines and structures.
- After a few minutes, invite groups to share 2-3 components of a mealtime routine.
- Write responses on a flip chart. Use the Mealtime Routines content in the Trainer’s Notes to add to the list if necessary.

#### Summary
- Summarize and synthesize the discussion.
- Present the Benefits of Mealtime Routines content in the Trainer’s Notes.

#### Trainer’s Notes
**Mealtime Routines**
Mealtime routines can include the following components:
- Meal planning
- Foreshadowing (e.g., 5-minute warning)
• Location of meal (family meals around the table, etc.)
• Mealtime schedule
• Regular meals shared between children and caregivers that include autonomy for the child and restore the child’s power to make choices
• Preparation routines such as hand washing and table setting
• Cooking and food preparation
• How the food is served (e.g., family style, buffet)
• Conversations and communication routines (e.g. sharing about the day, highs/lows, prayer)
• Mealtime clean up
• Minimizing distractions (e.g. no electronics, no tv, no tablets/phones)

Benefits of Mealtime Routines
• Regular meal and snack times better equip caregivers to feed children all the nutrients they need to grow and thrive. By planning ahead, food is more likely to be balanced and with a more intentional variety.
• Structured meals likely increase exposure to foods which may help children try new foods.
• Eating with caregivers is key to food learning, including learning about new foods, trying new foods, and learning things like manners and skills (e.g. using utensils or how to eat certain foods).
• Routines improve self-regulation and build an understanding of hunger and fullness.
• Mealtimes provide assurance of consistent access to food.
• Meals are more enjoyable when children are hungry and ready to eat instead of too hungry or not hungry from grazing.
• Routines bring comfort and consistency for children.
• Routines can help establish expectations.
• Mealtime creates a consistent time for connection and communication to help establish a supportive relationship.
• Routines and regular structure in a child’s day help support their sense of security and improves well-being.
• Mealtime promotes social and communication development.

Evidence of Learning
Participants will be able to explain at least 3 benefits of mealtime routines.
ESTABLISHING ROUTINES & CONNECTION

Supplies: • PowerPoint slides
• Flip Chart
• Markers
• Scissors
Activity Sheets: • Eating Zones Activity Sheet
• Conversation Starter Activity Sheet
Handouts • None

Learning Objectives
• Identify barriers to creating mealtime routines.
• Practice applying strategies to build healthy mealtime routines for children.

Introduction
• Introduce the topic by telling participants that we know there are many benefits to mealtime routines, but many families report having difficulty eating meals together regularly.
• Ask participants, “What are some barriers to creating mealtime routines?”
• Write down participants’ responses on the flip chart.
• Use the Barriers to Creating Mealtime Routines content in the Trainer’s Notes to help create a list of barriers.
• Tell participants that it is important to remember to stay supportive, sensitive, and responsive to the needs of the child, the family, and the adult when thinking about how to establish routines and connection.
• Present the Steps to Establishing Routines content in the Trainer’s Notes.

Mealtime Strategy Participant Presentation Activity
• Tell participants that they will practice some specific strategies that might be helpful in creating or supporting routines and connection at mealtime.
• Divide participants into two groups.
• One group will do the Eating Zones Activity Sheet and the other group will do the Conversation Starter Activity Sheet. Let that participants know that each group will demonstrate or explain their activity to the whole group.
• Provide the Eating Zones Activity Sheet to one group. Instruct this group to practice by making their own Eating Zone visual schedules.
• Provide the Conversation Starters Activity Sheet to the other group. Have the group create at least 3 sets of cards together to target different age groups (e.g., young children, school-aged children, youth, or teens).
• After 5-10 minutes, ask each group to demonstrate or explain their activity to the rest of the participants.

Summary
• Summarize and synthesize discussion.
• Present the Mealtime and Resilience content in the Trainer’s Notes to remind
participants how mealtime is about connection and to help keep that in mind while working toward more consistent mealtime routines.

### Barriers to Creating Mealtime Routines

- Difficult to have regular meals together due to varying schedules
- Expectations of a “family meal” may include homemade foods, perfect diet, every family member present, etc.
- A child’s previous mealtime habits are unknown to a foster family
- Meeting the needs of multiple children (some need to eat more, some less)
- Concern about wasting food
- Limited time for shopping, meal preparation, cooking, sitting down to eat, etc.
- Not used to eating without a TV or phone as a distraction
- Mealtime doesn’t happen at the table, child doesn’t want to sit at the table, or family doesn’t own a table large enough to gather around
- Not used to talking or sharing at mealtimes
- Too many food choices
- Too many appointments impacting family’s ability to create a schedule (e.g., therapy, doctors, school, sports, extracurricular activities)

### Steps to Establishing Routines

1. Work toward establishing regular times for meals and snacks.
2. Work toward reducing distractions.
3. Practice patience.
4. Work toward consistency.
5. Make room for flexibility.
6. Adjust as necessary.

### Mealtime and Resilience

Mealtime is about much more than just food. It provides an opportunity to build a relationship with the child. Mealtime offers a consistent opportunity to interact with children, respond to their needs, and build their trust by showing that you will provide for them and support them. Each mealtime provides an opportunity to offer care and connection to the child. Mealtime is an opportunity to support communication, offer love and reassurance, teach, and so much more. All of this may help support resilience.

### Evidence of Learning

Participants will be able to apply strategies for establishing mealtime routines.
### WHEN MEALTIMES GO WRONG AND WHAT TO DO

| Supplies: | • PowerPoint slides  
|          | • Flip chart  
|          | • Markers  
| Activity Sheets: | • None  
| Handouts | • Helpful Phrases Handout |

---

#### Learning Objectives

Examine mealtime difficulties and apply strategies to improve the meal.

#### Learning Activities

**Introduction**
- Introduce the topic by telling participants that, in addition to the barriers to establishing routines that families experience, there may also be other factors for children that make mealtime challenging.
- Ask participants to do a Round Robin brainstorm of reasons why a foster child might struggle with mealtimes. Tell them to contribute an idea one after the other, without feedback or judgement.
- Use the Why Foster Children Might Struggle with Mealtimes content in the Trainer’s Notes to add to the shared ideas as necessary.

**Troubleshooting Mealtime Challenges Activity**
- Introduce this activity by telling participants that there are some simple guidelines to help troubleshoot mealtime challenges. Tell participants that you will review the guidelines and then will practice applying these guidelines to troubleshoot mealtime challenges.
- Present the Guidelines for Addressing Mealtime Challenges content in the Trainer’s Notes to help define and give examples. Write down the guidelines on a flip chart:
  - Start small
  - Adapt the environment
  - Adjust your expectations
  - Use a teaching approach
  - Personalize it
- Divide participants into groups of 3-4 people.
- Have participants brainstorm a mealtime challenge that they have experienced or witnessed.
- As a group, practice applying at least two of the guidelines to the challenge.
- As time allows, invite groups to present their mealtime challenge and how they might be able to apply the guidelines to troubleshoot.

**Summarize**
- Summarize and synthesize the ideas shared by participants.
- Tell participants to always remember to use a supportive and responsive approach as they apply these simple guidelines to problem solve and work towards creating mealtime routines and establishing connection.
- Remind them that mealtime offers an opportunity to support communication, offer love and reassurance, teach, and so much more.
- Provide the Helpful Phrases Handout as an additional resource for new ways to interact with food, facilitate talking about food, and encourage exploration.

### Why Foster Children Might Struggle with Mealtimes

- Not enough food or regular access to food.
- Competing with others for enough food or fending for themselves and siblings to get enough.
- Limited or no exposure to different kinds of foods.
- Fed in unsupportive and developmentally inappropriate ways.
- Food used to punish, soothe, or manage behavior.
- Previous experiences of being forced to eat.
- Foods or smells may trigger memories of trauma or grief.
- Poor self-regulation of hunger and fullness (may be impacted by lack of structure e.g. grazing, filling up on milk, eating in front of TV, over snacking)
- Developmental delays impacting feeding skills.
- Sensory processing challenges that make eating difficult or uncomfortable.
- Medical issues that impact eating (e.g., discomfort related to current or history of reflux or allergies, history of prematurity, alcohol and drug exposure impacting development/behavior)

### Guidelines for Addressing Mealtime Challenges

#### Start Small
Think about small changes you can make to meet the child where they are and work toward a more consistent routine. For example, if a child has trouble sitting at the table, offer to start in small increments of time. If the child agrees to try sitting at the table for three minutes, you can set a timer and when the timer goes off, they can leave the table. Over time, they can work their way to 15-20 minutes. If they have trouble being at the table, but they’re willing to be in the room for mealtime, you can work slowly to transition from eating at the counter to sitting at the table. With trying new foods, this may mean allowing children to politely spit out food into a paper napkin or a “no thank you” bowl, as children are more likely to try something new if they know they aren’t expected to eat it.

#### Adapt the Environment
Think about what you can change in the environment to create a space for mealtime with fewer distractions, and one that feels safe and comfortable to eat and connect. Reduce distractions by turning off TVs and devices. Use a curtain to block the view of another room or tempting toys. Turn the child’s chair so that what is in view is not highly stimulating. Turn down the lights or turn on gentle music. If the chair is the problem, allow the child to kneel on the chair or stand on a spot marked with painter’s tape instead. Use straps if they help a child feel secure or remove straps from a chair if they are a problem for the child.

#### Adjust Your Expectations
You may need to adjust your expectations as you shape mealtime behaviors and challenges towards something more positive. Encourage children to use words to
describe their feelings. Allow them space and time to calm down or take a break when they need to. Model enjoying a variety of foods and feeling good about yourself and don’t focus on manners right away. Avoid negative language around food, but use descriptive language instead (e.g., crunchy, soft, sweet, sour).

**Use a Teaching Approach**
A teaching approach is designed to help children to “tap into” the part of their brain for thinking, reasoning, and problem solving. It begins with first acknowledging the observed behavior, feeling, or problem. Second, walk through the problem. Finally, encouraging the child to use words to describe their feelings. For example, “It looks like you are upset. Are you angry about sitting at the table? Help me understand why you are angry.” “I understand that you don’t want to sit at the table. Sitting at the table can definitely be hard. Can you think about why we might want to sit at the table? What can we do to make sitting at the table better for you?” This approach is responsive, supportive, and helps to create an opportunity for communication and connection.

**Personalize It**
If it helps the child feel comfortable, personalize mealtime with preferred themes or characters. Allow the child to choose their cup or utensils. Choose a special space for mealtime or decorate the child’s chair in a special way. Make familiar or preferred foods available during mealtime. Serve foods “family” or “buffet” style to allow children to serve or help serve themselves. Allow them to contribute ideas about how to personalize mealtime.

**Evidence of Learning**
Participants will be able to provide at least 3 ideas about how to improve a mealtime.