More than the Meal: Everyday Moments at Mealtimes

Mealtimes can be about more than just food. Many adults consider mealtime experiences as core memories of their childhood, often evoking emotions or paired with preconceived expectations of how they should be.



Shared mealtimes offer the opportunity for learning and connection, because of their potentially regular frequency and their focus on togetherness, but they don't need to be fancy, planned or curated. By offering opportunities to come together for a shared experience, mealtimes provide a chance for:

Everyday learning

Whilst children continue learning during mealtimes (including social skills, managing their feelings, and decision making), adults also learn about important aspects of each child during mealtimes (e.g. obvious and subtle hunger and 'had enough' cues, how a child shows different emotions, how they communicate specific needs/wants).

Modelling behaviours

When adults sit with children and eat similar foods, they are modelling the acceptability and normalisation of those foods. The way we talk about those foods also contributes to the formation of perceptions around the value and roles of specific food for children. If adults use neutral language, children can form these ideas for themselves, according to how the foods make them feel.

Everyday connection

Adults can also model calm, respectful, kind interactions, enhancing emotional safety and offering conditions which support communication and connection. Unhurried conversations, sharing food from different cultural backgrounds or generational experiences, and the simple act of sitting together, nurture a sense of community and belonging.

Just being

Not every mealtime needs to be a teaching moment or an opportunity to achieve specific goals. Sometimes, mealtimes are simply a time to sit, eat, and 'just be', with no expectation to talk, join in an activity, or try new foods.

It is important to acknowledge that **not every mealtime needs to do all four**, and that not every child will want or need the same thing at the same time. The aim is to notice what children need and to keep mealtimes low-pressure, responsive and genuinely supportive.

This information has been sourced from the Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment.

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