

Self-Help Skills Development: Meals and Snacks

HAVE YOU EVER WATCHED a three-year-old boy or girl eat spaghetti with a fork? It gets messy. Meals and snack times are perfect times for children to develop their skills, such as using a fork and cleaning up after the meal. After all, there is a lot of development going on inside that little person smeared in spaghetti sauce and pasta.



Objective:



Explain self-help skills developed during meals and snack time.

Key Terms:



autonomy
cognitive and problem
solving skills
initiative

least restrictive
environment
physical skills
self-help

self-esteem
social skills

Developing Self-Help Skills During Meal and Snack Times

Meal and snack times are not simply about food. Children can learn much about social norms and advance their physical, emotional, and social skills.

IMPORTANT SELF-HELP CONCEPTS

This section presents concepts about development of self and self-help skills in early childhood. Important developmental concepts are autonomy, initiative, self-esteem, and least restrictive environment.

Autonomy and Initiative

Erickson's developmental theory explains the importance of autonomy and initiative in early childhood. According to Erickson's developmental theory, children (ages 18 months to 3 years) want autonomy. **Autonomy** is freedom to make decisions for one's self. During this phase, children want to exert their will and be as independent as possible.

According to Erickson's developmental theory, children from three to five years old want to take initiative. **Initiative** is leading action or starting something without being told to do it. During this phase, children want to take the initiative and do the same things older people around them are doing.

Least Restrictive Environment

The **least restrictive environment** is a developmental approach in which teachers or parents give children as much freedom as possible to experiment and learn skills. For instance, a parent allows his or her child to hold and cut with a knife without hand-over-hand guidance while the child cuts. Conversely, a restrictive environment would limit freedom. For example, a parent allows his or her child to hold and cut with a knife only if he or she provides hand-over-hand guidance to the child during cutting.

When children first begin using sharp knives to cut food, parents should give hand-over-hand guidance for safety reasons. Yet after children are able to cut food safely by themselves, the parents should use the least restrictive environment approach, such as removing the hand-over-hand restriction and allowing children to cut independently. This approach fits with children's urges for autonomy and initiative during early childhood.



FIGURE 1. Children exercise independence.

Self-Help

Self-help is the act of a child taking ownership of a task and mastering skills as independently as possible.

For example, a child helps himself or herself by removing two pieces of bread and putting peanut butter and jelly on the bread or by cutting off the crusts. Self-help allows children to take ownership of their environment and to build personal development experiences.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the significance or value a child attaches to himself or herself. Self-esteem development trends can be positive or negative during early childhood, depending on whether adults support or neglect developmental needs. Research indicates that children who receive positive parental attention toward developmental needs are more likely to have higher self-esteem. In addition, research indicates that children (by age four) begin to evaluate them-



BROADENING AWARENESS...

AMAZING ASPECTS: Psychological Need to Control

One basic psychological need involved with self-help is the need to control. People have different personal psychological preferences in this area. For example, one psychology assessment, the Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation—Behavior, measures how people want to exert control over others or receive and be controlled by others. Some people like to take control of situations, and some people like to give control of situations to others.

How does this apply to developing self-help skills in children? Parents who may be used to taking control must learn to give control to their children. Meanwhile, children who want to give control to their parents must learn to take control. If neither the parents, nor the children want to take control, no one will be guiding the development of self-help skills. If both the parents and the children want to take control, power struggles will result. Yet the psychological need for control is important as parents help children develop self-help skills. The parents must give control to their children, and the children must take control from their parents during development of self-help skills.

selves on two levels: forming self-awareness about cognitive and physical abilities as well as forming self-awareness about social acceptance by peers and parents.

Connecting Self-Help with Self-Esteem

There is a logic connecting self-help with building self-esteem. Children exercise autonomy and initiative during early childhood years, resulting in the development of self-help skills. Parents and teachers can provide positive support in the least restrictive environment to allow children to develop self-help skills. The experience of self-help leads to an awareness of physical and social competence. As a result, children have the experience of being good at doing things by themselves. This sense of doing things independently leads to higher self-esteem.

SELF-HELP SKILLS

Learning activities during mealtime do not need to be overly structured. The caregivers can facilitate various developmental activities. Three areas related to meal and snack time are social, physical, and cognitive development. Included are examples of self-help skills and guidelines for supporting these skills.

Physical Skills

Physical skills are abilities children use to complete motor skill tasks for eating. Following are examples of physical self-help skills developed during snack and mealtime.

- ◆ Transitioning from sitting in a high chair to a booster chair to an adult chair
- ◆ Eating with a fork, knife, and spoon

- ◆ Transitioning from a “sippy” cup to a straw to a drinking glass
- ◆ Pouring drinks from a pitcher into a glass
- ◆ Scooping food from a larger container onto a plate
- ◆ Using a knife to cut or spread
- ◆ Washing hands before eating
- ◆ Cleaning an area after eating
- ◆ Placing scraps into the garbage and taking dishes to the sink
- ◆ Washing dishes after a meal or rinsing dishes and placing them in the dishwasher

Guidelines for Developing Physical Skills

Following are guidelines for developing physical skills during meal and snack time. Equipment such as cups, utensils, and types of chairs can fit developmental phases. For example, when children are ready, they stop using cups with handles and begin using cups without handles. Then they move from using straws to drinking without straws. Next, they move from plates with a ridge to flat plates. Eventually, they move from smaller spoons with bigger handles to bigger spoons with smaller handles. Caregivers should, however, use unbreakable dishes and drinking containers while children are learning.

In addition, caregivers should react appropriately to spills, falls, and messy eating. They should avoid punishing or shaming children for these mistakes. Instead, they should give verbal praise when children perform the skill successfully. Therefore, they should facilitate clean-up accidents without creating negative drama for children.

Social Skills

Social skills are abilities regarding how children interact with other people. Following are examples of social skills developed during snack and mealtime:

- ◆ Peacefully selecting a place to sit at the table
- ◆ Staying at the table during the meal or snack (not wandering)
- ◆ Responding to name and addressing others by name
- ◆ Using appropriate eye contact while talking



FIGURE 2. Allow children to help clean.



FIGURE 3. Maintaining eye contact with young children develops positive social skills.

- ◆ Using etiquette properly
- ◆ Serving food or drink to others
- ◆ Taking turns serving food

Guidelines for Developing Social Skills

Following are guidelines for developing social skills during snack and mealtime. The caregivers should make an effort to explain and model desired social behaviors while eating with children. Also, they should give verbal praise when children show desired social behaviors.

Laughing at or modeling inappropriate behaviors will reinforce those undesirable behaviors. As a result, children will repeat those behaviors later for a laugh. However, humor and laughing with children is a therapeutic method for teaching. Therefore, caregivers should include moments of humor and not make eating and snack time overly serious. They should avoid punishing or giving too much negative attention to socially unacceptable behaviors, should address inappropriate behavior quickly, and then should move on.

Cognitive and Problem-Solving Skills

Cognitive and problem-solving skills are abilities regarding how children learn to manage different situations that arise during meal and snack time. These skills overlap with physical and social self-help skills because cognitive and problem-solving skills provide the thinking behind physical and social actions. Following are examples of cognitive skills developed during snack and mealtime:

- ◆ Learning about and choosing healthier food and snack items
- ◆ Learning how and when to clean up accidental spills and messes, as well as learning strategies to avoid accidents (e.g., spilling while pouring)
- ◆ Learning vocabulary to describe different tastes and textures
- ◆ Communicating appropriately when food is not liked

Guidelines for Developing Cognitive and Problem-Solving Skills

Following are guidelines for developing cognitive skills during snack and mealtime. Many “teachable moments” exist in which caregivers can explain problem-solving strategies, such as how to decide whether to use a fork or spoon with different foods or how to use an appropriate amount of dish soap when cleaning dishes. So caregivers should look for teachable moments.

Caregivers should let children help prepare meals and snacks. In the process, they should teach them about measuring tools (e.g., tablespoons, teaspoon, and cups), and let them count as they add ingredients. Generally, pre-math concepts can be taught while measuring and preparing food. Also, they should purposely offer a variety of tastes and textures and teach vocabulary. In addition, food, snack choices, plates, and utensils should be placed where children can

reach and use the items independently. Also, the garbage and dish cleaning areas should be located in areas where children can use them independently.

Summary:



Self-help is the act of a child taking ownership of a task and mastering skills as independently as possible. Important concepts are autonomy, initiative, least restrictive environment, and self-esteem. Children exercise autonomy and initiative during early childhood years that lead to developing self-help skills.

Parents and teachers provide positive support in the least restrictive environment to allow self-help skills to develop in children. The experience of self-help leads to an awareness of physical and social competence. As a result, children have the experience of being good at doing things by themselves. This sense of doing things independently leads to higher self-esteem.

Snack and mealtime are good opportunities for the development of self-help skills in children (ages two to five years old). They can develop social, physical, and cognitive/problem-solving skills during snack and mealtime. Physical self-help includes learning to eat with a fork, knife, and spoon. Meanwhile, social self-help includes taking turns serving food. Cognitive/problem-solving skills include strategies for avoiding spilling while pouring and using vocabulary to describe food tastes and textures.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What is the definition of self-help?
2. What are three important concepts related to self-help?
3. What are three areas of early childhood development related to self-help?
4. What are three examples of physical self-help skills during mealtime?
5. What are three examples of social self-help skills during mealtime?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



During middle childhood and adolescence, the concept of self-help is still relevant. One area of developing self-help skills for middle-childhood and adolescence has to do with meta-cognition or thinking about thinking. During the ages of 6 and 12 years, people are developing the cognitive ability for self-reflection as a self-help tool. Expand your knowledge in this area by researching online. Then create a PowerPoint presentation based on your findings.

Web Links:



Family Style Meals

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nj_s89ydnBs

Self-Esteem in Children

<http://www.nncc.org/guidance/self.esteem.html>

Toddlers and Self-Help Skills

<http://www.extension.org/pages/26436/ways-to-encourage-self-help-skills-in-children>