

Helping Young Children Learn to Serve Themselves in Group Settings

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Some people call it “family style service.” Others call it “children serving themselves.” We like to call it “community style service.”

Whatever you call it, it means that containers of food are put on the table. Then, children pass a common container around the table, each taking some for their plates.

Sometimes a whole meal is available for children to serve themselves. Sometimes, part of a meal is available for self-service. The children may pour their drinks, though other food is pre-served.

Think about all the things a child is working to learn and develop at mealtimes in group settings. Centers and family care providers use a variety of routines around self-serving, depending on the age or skills of the children. For example, adults may initially serve small helpings on toddler’s plates, but put out bowls of food for self-service on seconds. This thoughtful approach helps toddlers get through the first few bites without having to wait for others. Waiting is a task that toddlers are learning!

Worry about hygiene risks sometimes make adults wary of letting children serve themselves. Establishing routines and patiently helping children build skills for serving self minimizes these risks.

There are so many benefits to children when they serve their own plates. They learn to be social, caring, and self-directed diners in group settings. Most importantly, children learn to listen to and manage their own feelings of being full or hungry.



CHILDREN'S SKILLS FOR SERVING SELF

Janice Fletcher and Laurel Branen

Children learn a variety of skills for serving themselves. Here are some of those skills that you can help children acquire.

Hold and physically pass the bowls or pitchers.

Bowls with rims and pitchers with covers make beginning attempts more forgiving.

Pass the bowls or pitchers so they are successfully received by someone else.

Children need reminders to look at the person who is passing or receiving the bowl or pitcher. Toddlers can start "passing" bowls to the teacher who is already skilled in looking. Toddlers and even young threes need to be reminded to look. They are busy learning the task of holding and at the same time moving the bowl of food or pitcher of milk. They may be unable to simultaneously focus on the third task of watching the other person in the duet of passing.

Judge space for the bowls or pitchers.

Judging size of a bowl or pitcher and how much space it will take is a task best learned through trial and error. Children learn how far from the edge to place a bowl, so it does not become imbalanced and fall.

Efficiently use serving utensils.

Provide utensils that are balanced, fairly lightweight, and have short handles that are small enough for young children's hands to grasp all the way around. Try lightweight ice cream scoops, small tongs, small ladles, and spoons that have deep bowls.

Direct requests and needs to people using give and take of conversation.

Teachers help by eating with children, modeling conversational give and take, and suggesting words to use when asking for foods.

Wait for a turn.

Be sure there are several pitchers or bowls on the table so waiting is not too long. Match the skills the children have for waiting, the number of children at the table, and the number of serving bowls.

Balance serving containers while they serve from them.

This means not dumping the food out of the container as they serve themselves. Consider putting small amounts of food in pitchers and bowls and increasing the amounts as the child gets more skilled. Neither children nor adults enjoy the interruption of spills!



Spoon food from a serving dish without using their fingers to steady food in the bowls.

Provide appropriate child friendly utensils and bowls with rounded sides that offer space to push food with the utensil against the rounded sides of the bowl.

Judge amounts of how much to put on their plates.

The initial novelty of serving self sometimes is reflected in children over serving their plates. This is usually short lived and resolves itself when children routinely serve themselves. To help children learn to judge amounts for pouring and scooping, try offering pouring and scooping activities at the sand or water table. Set out some pitchers and cups and glasses with water for a small group time. These non-food pouring/scooping activities give children practice.

Judge amounts of how much is in the bowl for children at the table.

Make sure there is plenty of food for children to get full. Sometimes you may run out of a desired food. With children older than three, it is appropriate to talk about how much is left. Discuss how we can each have a small bit of the remaining food, if we are still hungry. Give the option of eating some or not. Tell the children that you will be sure the food is served again. For younger children, remove the bowl from sight and redirect the child to more plentiful food.

Know the difference in serving utensils and personal eating utensils.

This skill is combined with the skill of delaying eating until they have switched hands from the serving utensils to their own spoon or fork. Make a definite and obvious difference in the size of the utensils they eat with and the size of the serving utensils. Choose forks, knives, and spoons that are child sized. Provide forks that have dull tines, spoons with rounded, blunt ends, and knives with rounded ends.

Keep themselves and others safe from cross contamination.

Hand washing is an obvious skill here. This includes techniques for proper hand washing as well as knowing WHEN to wash. This task includes using napkins instead of licking their hands, using only their own plates and flatware, and keeping their food on their plates.

Share children's success at serving themselves with parents and grandparents in your center.

Be sure to share a child's successes in serving self. Explain to parents why you use self-serving in your center, and how you set it up so the children are successful. Sit-down family mealtimes are rare these days. Many families eat on the run, with children often eating a pre-filled plate of food with no adults at the table. Help parents know about the value of children serving themselves at a family table, and the impact this has on portion sizes and children's healthy weight.