

Maryland

Making Family Style Dining Work

How did the Jewish Community Center switch to family style dining?



Preschooler at the Jewish Community Center uses child-size tongs to serve himself pieces of a banana..

The center's Registered Nurse, Christine Sigman, helped teachers see that family style dining with little ones is possible. Her strategy was simple. She showed teachers a 3-minute video of kids successfully serving themselves. [Watch the video](#)

Teachers geared up to make the change to family style dining. The center's Registered Nurse, Christine Sigman, led a training session on family style dining, where she shared "how to" tips to prepare teachers to lead family style meals. She also handed out a letter that included the center's new family style dining policy. As a reminder, the letter also answered the question, "Why Family-Style Dining?" by listing the many benefits of family style dining, such as:

- Teaches children fine motor skills as they pass bowls and use tongs
- Teaches sharing and the concept of taking turns
- Children learn to take what they feel they're hungry for and gauge how much food they need on their plates

Teachers take turns being in charge. Preparing meals and getting the food on the table can be a big job. Teachers at the Jewish Community Center work as a team and switch off who is responsible for preparing the food for the day. This helps to make the job easier for everyone.

How did the Jewish Community Center overcome challenges?

The center got the right equipment. At first, kids had a hard time passing large serving bowls and using spoons to put dip on their plates. So, the center hunted for equipment sized just for kids. They found lighter serving bowls and child size tongs, measuring cups for kids to use for serving themselves milk and water, and squirt bottles for healthy dips like hummus.

Teachers encouraged kids to practice and prepared for mistakes. Spilling and dropping utensils is part of the learning process. So, teachers created a supportive eating environment by staying calm and letting kids know it's okay to make mistakes. Teachers also encouraged kids to help clean up messes so they could feel a sense of control. After some practice, kids got the hang of it. Now, they are passing dishes, scooping up veggies and pouring milk all by themselves.

The center uses simple strategies to keep food germ free. At the beginning of every year, all classes are given a lesson about how to avoid spreading germs during meal time. Kids also learn how to cough and sneeze into their elbow (not their hands), and they wash their hands before every meal.

Tips for Success

- **Use child size equipment.** Small pitchers with tops, small serving bowls and plates, and child size forks, spoons, and tongs make it easier for kids to serve themselves. Kids will be proud when they use the equipment and see what they're able to do.
- **Set a good example.** Eat with kids and let them see you choosing and enjoying healthy foods. Teach kids how to pass and serve themselves by letting them watch you do it.
- **Be ready for mistakes.** Your kids will spill food, drop utensils, or even contaminate the food with their little coughs and sneezes, especially if they are just learning. Be prepared with paper towels, more clean utensils, and extra food within reach.
- For more tips to help you make family style dining a success in your program, check out [Making the Most of Meal Times](#).

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