



# Mealtime Mentoring

June 2008

## Menu Planning

*How can you put a healthy meal on the table when you are running in several different directions, many times during the day?*

Start with a menu plan that has an established meal pattern. A meal pattern helps ensure your meals are nutritious and satisfying. Using Canada's Food Guide, offer:

- 3 food groups at breakfast
- 4 food groups at lunch and supper
- 2 food groups at each snack. One must be a vegetable or fruit.
- milk at least once a day

As well, there are other suggestions that can help you plan meals that are appealing and acceptable to children.

**Choice** – Let children select foods they want to eat when it is possible. You can do this by offering 2 or 3 choices of vegetables/fruits. For example: carrot sticks or broccoli, apple wedges, orange sections or a banana.

**Variety** – Plan a week or two of meals at a time. This will help you avoid duplicating foods too often. As well, posting your weekly menu helps parents work around it and not repeat foods at home.



**Texture** – Different textures within a meal add interest. Choose foods that are crunchy, smooth, chewy or soft.

**Aroma** – The aroma of food will stimulate anyone's appetite. Prepare foods that smell good while cooking – buns baking, onions simmering, and spices like cinnamon or garlic.

**Color** – Colorful meals are appealing to the eye. Serve a variety of colors in each meal. Food should look good on a plate. Alter bold coloured food with bland coloured food. Health-wise, fruits and vegetables with darker coloured flesh generally have more nutrients.

**Simplicity** – Some children don't want their food to touch. Serve foods separately and those who want it mixed together can do so themselves.

**Independence** – Allow children to choose their own amounts of food or serve themselves. Children will begin to take responsibility for what they eat and will be more likely to eat the food offered.

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## Practical Tips

### Plan Ahead

- Keep meals and snacks simple. Healthy food doesn't have to take a lot of time to prepare. It can be quick to fix. Spend time with the children, not on preparing time-consuming meals.
- Cook when you have time. Stews, casseroles and soups can be made ahead of time and put in the freezer.
- Prepare ahead. Some tasks can be done hours ahead or the day before; rice or noodles for salads, filling for tacos, fruit salad and trimming vegetables. Refrigerate until ready to use.

### Time Saving Tips

- Cook for now and freeze some for another week – spaghetti sauce, chili, casseroles.
- Cook once for all the children. Does one of the children like his food plain or not mixed together? Take out portions before you mix them and he will have the same meal as the rest of the children.
- Choose an appropriate cooking method. Microwaving, stir-frying and broiling are faster cooking methods for on the spot cooking but they require your attention. Roasting, baking or using a crock-pot take longer but you can leave them to cook on their own.
- Incorporate cold foods/meals in your menu – vegetables and dip, canned

tuna or salmon in a salad, build your own sandwiches.

- Use partially prepared foods such as grated cheese, prepared vegetables, tossed salad mixes or marinated meats. Compare prices as necessary.

### Stock Up

- Keep foods on hand that can be prepared quickly or that complement a meal in a hurry.
  - frozen vegetables and fruits
  - canned tuna and salmon
  - canned beans in tomato sauce
  - pasta
  - whole grain crackers
  - cheese
  - yogurt

### Involve Children in your Menus

- When planning your menu, think about more than just what you will serve. How can you involve the children? You can ask the children for menu ideas or you can keep the children occupied with simple food preparation tasks. They are natural kitchen helpers and they enjoy helping out, even though meals may take a little longer to prepare.



*Involving children in planning and preparing meals, teaches them skills, responsibility and self-esteem and you benefit from their help.*

*Helping you provide healthy food and a positive eating environment in early learning and child care settings.*