



Spotlight on Family-Style Eating at the Head Start Addison County Early Learning Center

It's 11:30 a.m., and children and teachers are washing their hands and gathering around child-size tables to share a meal. Bowls of delicious home-cooked food are passed around and conversations unfold. "Please pass the green beans." "Johnny, would you like some chicken?" This homey scene is an important aspect of building community at Addison County Early Learning Center (ACELC) in New Haven.

This approach is called Family Style Meals. Head Start provides two meals and one snack per day, offering the five food components to promote children's health. Betsy, the cook on site, provides nutritious meals, including whole grain bread and pasta, fresh fruit and vegetables, and many homemade dishes.

Betsy has a contagious enthusiasm, a quick laugh, and a deep passion for caring for children and their health. She lives out her philosophy and approach through the work she does with children. Betsy shares her thoughts and experiences feeding children at ACELC:

Q. Why do you think family style meals are important?

Betsy: Family Style Meal service allows children to be more independent in their choices and portion sizes. They can regulate food intake and learn about a variety of different foods. Mealtime is a fun time for children to learn language and vocabulary and practice all kinds of developmental skills, including self-regulation and building community.

Q. Can you share a nugget or two from any recent professional development?

Betsy: At a recent workshop, a nutritionist was speaking about fussy or picky eaters. She said instead of calling them "fussy or picky eaters," let's call them "selective eaters." That just stood out to me because it sounds

humble and respectful too. I also learned that involving children with the mealtime by creating a list, shopping, preparing meals, setting the table, and cleaning up helps build their self-esteem and independence. I have learned so much at workshops, but just observing the children has taught me a lot.

Q. Can you tell a story that illustrates how your job brings you joy?

Betsy: Watching the children grow and change brings me joy, which is hard to put into words. There have been times when a family member has come to me and shared how much their child enjoyed the food that was prepared at Head Start, or asked for a recipe because the child loved it. The families are always excited when they hear that their child tries new foods. When they see the changes in their child's eating habits, they are encouraged. And that makes me smile.

Q. Any advice for parents about how to support children's healthy eating habits?

- Children may need to see a new food offered 10-15 times before they try it.
- Show enthusiasm! Comment on color, texture, taste, and where the food comes from.
- Avoid insisting that your child eat the food. Keeping mealtimes positive is important.
- Show your child how to tune in to how their belly feels to support reading their own body.
- Appetites can change day to day; focus more on weekly habits.
- Sit together as a family, have conversations, and most importantly ... have fun!