

Dining Away from Home with Young Children

Young children eat some meals outside of their home. Locations include other homes, schools, parks, food courts, cafeterias, hotels, and restaurants. Supporting young children as they learn to enjoy meals in new places takes some effort, but the outcome is rewarding.



Set expectations for eating at home

The first step toward a good dining experience in a new place is a good dining experience in a familiar place. Use meals at home to teach and practice expectations related to handling food (fingers or utensils), politely asking for or saying no to food, chatting with others during the meal, and asking to be excused. Mealtime skills used at home are useful in new places.

Set expectations for eating in a new place

Dining in a new place may be challenging. Parents know their child best. They can anticipate challenges and provide encouragement. “You’re in training for the adventure of having nice meals away from home!”

Describe similarities and differences

Children can prepare for a new dining experience by understanding how it is the same and/or different than their familiar setting. Concrete examples are helpful.

- “At home, food is on the table when you arrive. At the cafeteria, we’ll select our food and bring it to our table.”
- “At home, our dinner lasts about 20 minutes. Our holiday meal at grandma’s house will be longer.”

Encourage children to ask questions about the upcoming meal.

Anticipate challenges

What is difficult for one child might be pleasant for another. A child that enjoys trying new foods may be excited to visit a buffet or potluck; a child that resists new foods may find this overwhelming. Some children may experience sensory overload in restaurants that are very loud. Acknowledge potential challenges and offer a few acceptable choices. Be clear about options that are not available.

- “We are going to the neighbor’s house for dinner. When they offer you a food, you can say “yes, please” or “no, thank you.” We aren’t bringing our own food from home.”
- “We will stay seated at the table in this restaurant. Before our food arrives, you’ll get to color on the placemat. Then we’ll eat. When the server clears your place, you can color or play with your bag of farm animals. We won’t be walking around.”

Start small

It can take many tries to get comfortable dining away from home. Take small steps on this journey. Start with an experience that has more similarities than differences.

- Pack a lunch to eat in the food court at the mall. The food will be familiar, but the experience (seating, lights, sounds, smells) will be new.
- Try a new food on a picnic in your favorite park. The new food may be a challenge, but the setting will be comforting.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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