

Mealtimes are an important part of the early childhood routine.

Mealtimes give children an opportunity to refuel their bodies for more play and learning. While many engage in mealtimes, some children may require more support and encouragement.

Here are some ways to support positive mealtime experiences for all children in an early childhood setting.



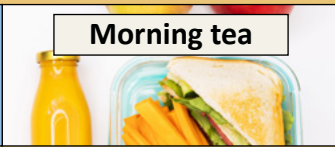







Before the mealtime

- Use **transition warnings** to prepare children ahead of mealtimes.
- **Visual supports**, such as a photo or a visual schedule, can support children to understand what will happen next.
- Encourage children to pack away toys and activities before the start of mealtimes to **reduce distractions** in their environment.

5 more
minutes until
morning tea.

Example visual schedule

1.	 <p>Group time</p>	 <p>Finished</p>
2.	 <p>Morning tea</p>	 <p>Finished</p>
3.	 <p>Outside play</p>	 <p>Finished</p>
4.	 <p>Lunch</p>	 <p>Finished</p>

During the mealtime

- Support **stable posture** by ensuring a child’s hips, knees and ankles are at 90 degree angles. You can adjust table height, chair size, and introduce footstools to achieve this. A ream of paper wrapped in contact or duct tape makes an excellent footstool!
- **Take the pressure off** children to eat if they are not ready to. You might like to offer alternatives to sitting for the whole mealtime, such as sitting for 1-2 minutes, or sitting with a fidget tool at the table.
- Instead of giving instructions or asking questions, use **“you can” phrases** to encourage the children to interact with their foods, *“You can poke it with your fork”* or *“You can take a bite.”*



Fidget toy

- **Use neutral or educational language** to describe the sensory properties of a food, including its appearance, texture, smell, and taste. For example, we might describe apple slices as wet, crunchy, juicy, or sweet.

Crunchy

Juicy

Wet

Sweet

- Model a **growth mindset** to learn about foods. For example, if a child expresses that they dislike a food or that it is yucky, you can model, *“You’re still learning about the food.”*
- **Reduce sensory input** by giving the child more space away from other children’s food, or even reducing the amount of food on their plate. Having a damp cloth at the table for wiping their hands can also reduce anxiety around interacting with wet or messy foods.



For children with highly restricted food intake or significant behaviours around mealtimes, input from an allied health professional trained in mealtime supports is recommended.

Important note: *If a child frequently chokes, gags, or coughs when eating or drinking, it is recommended the family take them to their GP or Speech Pathologist urgently.*

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