

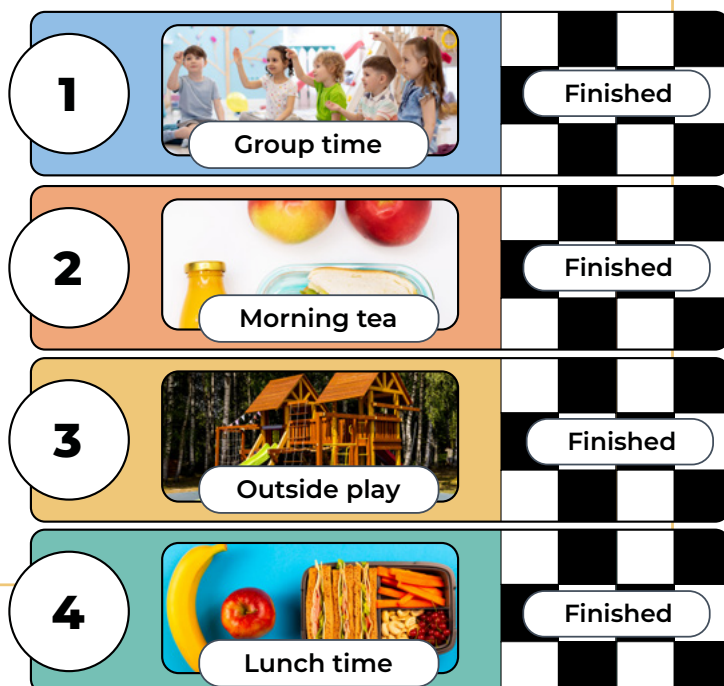
Supporting Mealtimes

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:

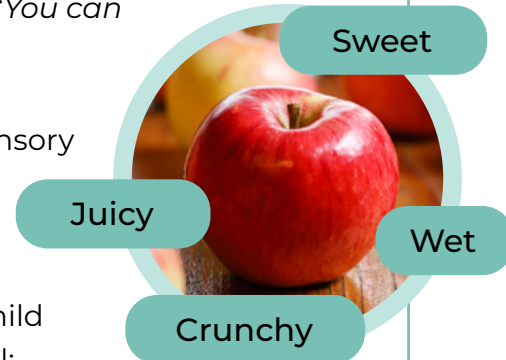
Before the mealtime:

- Use **transition warnings** to prepare children ahead of mealtimes.
- Visual supports, such as a photo of mealtime 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.



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!
- If children are not ready to eat, **take the pressure off**. 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. Implementing progressive or staggered mealtimes can support this.
- Instead of giving instructions or asking questions, use **"you can" phrases** to encourage the children to interact with their foods (e.g. *"You can poke it with your fork"* or *"You can take a bite"*).
- Use **neutral or educational language** to describe the sensory properties of a food, including its appearance, texture, smell, and taste.
- Model a **growth mindset** to learn about foods (e.g. if a child expresses they dislike a food or it is yucky, you can model: *"You're still learning about the food"*).
- Give the child more space away from other children's food to **reduce sensory input**. You could even try reducing the amount of food on the child's 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.

Tips for providing food in an early childhood centre:

- Display **visuals** of the meals for the day/week ahead of time to support **predictability** for children.
- Serve **meals in their separate parts** (e.g. pasta and sauce separately) so that children can choose what they like. Children may be more likely to try something rather than refusing the whole meal.
- Ensure there is always one **familiar or preferred food** served alongside any new or less preferred foods. If children have specific preferences that can not be reasonably met by the centre, they may like to bring a lunchbox of their '**safe foods**'.



Important:

If a child **frequently chokes, gags, or coughs when eating or drinking**, it is recommended the family take them to their doctor/general practitioner (GP) or speech pathologist urgently.



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