

SUMMER MEAL PARTNERS

Best Practices for Engagement and Participation in Summer Food Service Program



The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a beneficial program for children to receive free meals during summer months.

When youth participate in SFSP...

- socialization and connectedness are improved
- learning skills are enhanced
- physical activity and weight management are improved
- effects of food insecurity are decreased
- summer learning loss is decreased

For many reasons, however, participation may decrease throughout the course of the summer, preventing children from accessing meals and the benefits that come with SFSP. To ensure that children continue to participate in SFSP, efforts should be made to promote engagement at each site.

Three Ways to Encourage Youth to Visit Your Meal Site

1 // Communication

- **Let families know how they can find meal sites.** <https://connectingkidstomeals.org/our-work/summer-meals/>
- **Reach out to organizations and gathering sites commonly used by the community.** Talk with a library or other locations to help promote your summer program.
- **Emphasize that no paperwork is necessary for children to receive meals through SFSP.** Parents can often feel overwhelmed with providing financial documentation, so advertising SFSP as paperwork-free can help increase participation and retention.

2 // Meal Environment

- **Provide a welcoming environment.** Ensure that the site is safe and clean, and staff and volunteers are being friendly and respectful toward youth.
- **Look for opportunities to engage children during SFSP.** Have short activities planned as they wait for their meals or talk with them as they eat.
- **Be a healthy eating role model during meals.** This promotes healthy eating behaviors.
- **Engage teenagers by asking them to serve as leaders or volunteers.** This provides a more rewarding experience for teens as well as younger children.

3 // Enrichment

- **Provide enrichment activities.** Activities could include taste tests, sports, board games, tutoring, arts and crafts, gardening class, and others.
- **Serve meals before enrichment activities.** This can help children stay more focused during activities and helps enhance their learning.
- **Consider hosting an event later in the summer, if possible.** Hosting events or having themes can increase excitement and remind community members who may have forgotten about the program.

Tips for Creating a Pleasant Mealtime Environment

Start every day like it's a new day.	Welcome each child with a warm greeting.
Include everyone .	Establish 3-4 rules with the children, not for them.
Be fair and treat everyone the same.	Have a zero tolerance for bullying, even as a joke.
Leave your cares and worries at home.	Have activities that engage everyone.
Be an active role model and participate.	Have fun!

How to Be a Healthy Eating Role Model

- 1. Don't rush meals.** Allow for enough time for children to eat and enjoy the experience within meal service time requirements.
- 2. Encourage children to try new foods and praise them when they do.** It can take 10 or more exposures for children to like a new food.
- 3. Sit with children for meals, if possible.** Offer assistance to younger children if needed.
- 4. Engage children in conversation about meals and healthy foods.** For example, ask them to name the food groups or their favorite healthy foods and ask what they like about them.
- 5. Don't use the "clean your plate" rule.** Let children know it's OK to stop eating when they are full.
- 6. Be thoughtful of the words you use to encourage healthy eating.** Use phrases that help and avoid phrases that hinder healthy eating.

For example:



Use words to point out the sensory qualities of food. This encourages children to try new foods.

"These carrots are crunchy!"



Questions can help children feel like they are making choices.

"Which one is your favorite?"



Negative phrases that teach kids they must eat for approval can lead to unhealthy attitudes about food and themselves.

"Just eat it."



Phrases that make some foods seem better than others can lead to overeating.

"No dessert until you eat your vegetables."

Useful References

For more information about SFSP, visit the following websites:

USDA Summer Meal Toolkit:

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-meals-toolkit>

No Kid Hungry Outreach Information for Different Settings:

<https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-meals/promote-summer-meals>

No Kid Hungry Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit:

<https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/summer-meals-outreach-toolkit>

Summer Meal Partners Coalition:

<https://www.partnerstoledo.org/summer-meal-partners/>