



ISSUES FOR SERVING SELF

Janice Fletcher, EdD and Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

Look at these issues related to children serving themselves. What skills might we teach children that help defuse the issue? What routines and strategies might staff use to help the child acquire the needed skills?

ISSUE	CHILD SKILLS	TEACHER STRATEGY
Judging portion amounts (Children may take too much)		
Messiness/Spills		
Waste		
Cross-Contamination		
Takes too much time		
Adult has too much to do monitoring tables to allow children to serve themselves		
Food service is cafeteria style or children bring their lunches		
Consideration of the cook's feelings		



ASUNTOS RELACIONADOS CON SERVIRSE SOLOS

Janice Fletcher, EdD and Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

Podríamos enseñar a los niños para ayudarles a resolver el problema? Qué estrategias podría usar una persona encargada de atender a los niños para ayudar al niño a adquirir las habilidades y destrezas necesarias?

ASUNTO	DESTREZAS INFANTILES	ESTRATEGIAS DE ENSEÑANZA
Las destrezas infantiles están desarrollando		
Juzgando cantidades (Los niños pueden servirse demasiado)		
Desorden		
Desperdicio		
Contaminación		
Se demora demasiado		
El adulto tiene demasiado que hacer supervisando mesas y ayudando a los niños a servirse solos.		
El servicio de los alimentos es estilo cafetería o los niños traen sus almuerzos		
Consideración de los sentimientos del cocinero		



Helping Young Children Learn to Serve Themselves in Group Settings

Janice Fletcher, EdD and Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

Some people call it “family style service.” Others call it “children serving themselves.” We like to call it “community style service.”

Whatever you call it, it means that containers of food are put on the table. Then, children pass a common container around the table, each taking some for their plates.

Sometimes a whole meal is available for children to serve themselves. Sometimes, part of a meal is available for self-service. The children may pour their drinks, though other food is pre-served.

Think about all the things a child is working to learn and develop at mealtimes in group settings. Centers and family care providers use a variety of routines around self-serving, depending on the age or skills of the children. For example, adults may initially serve small helpings on toddler’s plates, but put out bowls of food for self-service on seconds. This thoughtful approach helps toddlers get through the first few bites without having to wait for others. Waiting is a task that toddlers are learning!

Worry about hygiene risks sometimes make adults wary of letting children serve themselves. Establishing routines and patiently helping children build skills for serving self minimizes these risks.

There are so many benefits to children when they serve their own plates. They learn to be social, caring, and self-directed diners in group settings. Most importantly, children learn to listen to and manage their own feelings of being full or hungry.



CHILDREN'S SKILLS FOR SERVING SELF

Janice Fletcher and Laurel Branen

Children learn a variety of skills for serving themselves. Here are some of those skills that you can help children acquire.

Hold and physically pass the bowls or pitchers.

Bowls with rims and pitchers with covers make beginning attempts more forgiving.

Pass the bowls or pitchers so they are successfully received by someone else.

Children need reminders to look at the person who is passing or receiving the bowl or pitcher. Toddlers can start “passing” bowls to the teacher who is already skilled in looking. Toddlers and even young threes need to be reminded to look. They are busy learning the task of holding and at the same time moving the bowl of food or pitcher of milk. They may be unable to simultaneously focus on the third task of watching the other person in the duet of passing.

Judge space for the bowls or pitchers.

Judging size of a bowl or pitcher and how much space it will take is a task best learned through trial and error. Children learn how far from the edge to place a bowl, so it does not become imbalanced and fall.

Efficiently use serving utensils.

Provide utensils that are balanced, fairly lightweight, and have short handles that are small enough for young children’s hands to grasp all the way around. Try lightweight ice cream scoops, small tongs, small ladles, and spoons that have deep bowls.

Direct requests and needs to people using give and take of conversation.

Teachers help by eating with children, modeling conversational give and take, and suggesting words to use when asking for foods.

Wait for a turn.

Be sure there are several pitchers or bowls on the table so waiting is not too long. Match the skills the children have for waiting, the number of children at the table, and the number of serving bowls.

Balance serving containers while they serve from them.

This means not dumping the food out of the container as they serve themselves. Consider putting small amounts of food in pitchers and bowls and increasing the amounts as the child gets more skilled. Neither children nor adults enjoy the interruption of spills!

**Spoon food from a serving dish without using their fingers to steady food in the bowls.**

Provide appropriate child friendly utensils and bowls with rounded sides that offer space to push food with the utensil against the rounded sides of the bowl.

Judge amounts of how much to put on their plates.

The initial novelty of serving self sometimes is reflected in children over serving their plates. This is usually short lived and resolves itself when children routinely serve themselves. To help children learn to judge amounts for pouring and scooping, try offering pouring and scooping activities at the sand or water table. Set out some pitchers and cups and glasses with water for a small group time. These non-food pouring/scooping activities give children practice.

Judge amounts of how much is in the bowl for children at the table.

Make sure there is plenty of food for children to get full. Sometimes you may run out of a desired food. With children older than three, it is appropriate to talk about how much is left. Discuss how we can each have a small bit of the remaining food, if we are still hungry. Give the option of eating some or not. Tell the children that you will be sure the food is served again. For younger children, remove the bowl from sight and redirect the child to more plentiful food.

Know the difference in serving utensils and personal eating utensils.

This skill is combined with the skill of delaying eating until they have switched hands from the serving utensils to their own spoon or fork. Make a definite and obvious difference in the size of the utensils they eat with and the size of the serving utensils. Choose forks, knives, and spoons that are child sized. Provide forks that have dull tines, spoons with rounded, blunt ends, and knives with rounded ends.

Keep themselves and others safe from cross contamination.

Hand washing is an obvious skill here. This includes techniques for proper hand washing as well as knowing WHEN to wash. This task includes using napkins instead of licking their hands, using only their own plates and flatware, and keeping their food on their plates.

Share children's success at serving themselves with parents and grandparents in your center.

Be sure to share a child's successes in serving self. Explain to parents why you use self-serving in your center, and how you set it up so the children are successful. Sit-down family mealtimes are rare these days. Many families eat on the run, with children often eating a pre-filled plate of food with no adults at the table. Help parents know about the value of children serving themselves at a family table, and the impact this has on portion sizes and children's healthy weight.



Task Analysis for Children Serving Themselves

Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD and Janice Fletcher, EdD

Task	Child's Skills	Equipment Needed	Adult Strategies

Un Análisis De Tareas Niños Sirviéndose Solos



Habilidades Infantiles	Equipo necesario	Estrategias de las profesoras



FEEDING YOUNG CHILDREN
IN GROUP SETTINGS

(cc) Feeding Young Children in Group Settings
<http://www.cals.uidaho.edu/feeding/>

--	--	--

Janice Fletcher, EdD and Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

Talking Points for Trainers
Training Staff to Help Children Develop Self-regulation Using
Descriptive Reinforcement and Encouragement Rather Than Praise
Janice Fletcher, EdD and Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

GOALS

- 1. Staff know strategies for effectively reinforcing young children's learning at the table*
- 2. Staff support children to attend to internal cues around hunger and fullness rather than external cues*
- 3. Staff support children as they learn about food and eating skills*

Why Do People Use Praise?

- People praise out of habit.
- People are positively reinforced when a child responds to their praise.
- People praise because it seems like a nice thing to do.
- People praise because it makes them feel "in charge" and "in control."
- People praise because the activity of praising makes them feel they are taking a "more active" role in the child's activities.
- People believe praise gives children "self esteem."

Perils of Praise around Eating

Praise at the table is typically quick and superficial. Most praise is offered as an evaluation of what a child ate, rather than as a focused plan to reinforce a child's processes or efforts around eating. Common terms of praise are "Good job." "Good boy." "You are a good eater." "Hurrah for you." "I like that!"

Praise can:

- create a harmful competitive atmosphere around eating and trying food;
- lead to discouragement about eating;
- generate feelings of apathy toward eating cues;
- engender judgmental attitudes;
- create dependency on external control for hunger and fullness cues; and
- undermine persistence and attending skills when the praise interrupts the child's eating and mealtime activities.

Advantages of Encouragement and Descriptive Reinforcement

Encouragement and descriptive reinforcement help children strengthen personal skills:

- courage to try new foods and eating skills;
- persistence in learning skills at the table;
- positive risk taking around new foods and meal behaviors;
- internal control in relation to hunger and fullness cues;
- self-regulation around eating behaviors and emotions;
- internal motivation to initiate new skills and maintain learned skills;
- self-confidence around eating;
- feelings of competence around eating skills and emotions; and
- belief in self as a healthy eater.

Techniques for Encouraging at Mealtimes

- Allow children to try foods, choose amounts, and serve themselves with only minimal interruptions.
- Plan meal environments and activities to match levels of ability. Choose activities that lead to individual success and challenge. Avoid frustration. (Example...as a child learns to use a table knife, prepare food that is easy to cut or spread).
- Ask children about their feelings and opinions about tastes, smells, and textures of food, rather than over-riding their evaluations of the food without consideration of a child's skills and knowledge.

Techniques for Using Descriptive Reinforcement at Mealtimes

- Focus adult comments on the skills the child is gaining.
- Describe a child's effort or actions as she approaches eating and tries foods and serving herself, rather than evaluating the outcome of an activity
- Use words paired with physical or partial physical assists as skills are attempted. Eliminate the physical assists as the child makes progress toward the skill.
- Eventually use non-verbal communication such as gestures, nods or hand motions nods to support children's growing skills and efforts
- Use vocabulary that reflects acceptance of children's effort.

What People Must Know to Use Descriptive Reinforcement

- Possess skills for objective observation.
- Know which skills are developing and when to encourage the skills as they progress.
- Know differential definitions of "praise" and "encouragement."



- Possess a descriptive vocabulary to reinforce processes.
- Know how to focus toward helping children find internal (process) reinforcement rather than focusing on external praise and teacher control through praise.

Common Questions

Question

Doesn't it take too much time to stop and reinforce descriptively? Is it worth all that effort?

Answer

Excellent teachers are always encouraging children. “Good job!” is a statement that gives an external value judgment. Contrast that with this statement, “You spread the butter on your bread without any help, and you didn’t tear the bread at all!” Think about the difference in what is communicated. Yes, the effort is worth helping a child know what skill she achieved.

When you learn how to descriptively reinforce around mealtimes, you will find it easy, and you will likely not feel the need to offer superficial praise. (Try it out with your friends, your family, or your spouse. It gets easier as you practice.

Question

Is it wrong to just say something simple such as, “you are a good eater.” Is that a bad thing?

Answer

This praise statement is well intentioned, but it doesn’t teach anything specific or give the child information about what he has accomplished or the effort he used. It may make for competition, as well. In an effort to please you, the child hopes to hear you say, “You are a good eater.” To continue to please you, a child might eat outside his internal cues boundaries. Sometimes other children will hear your statement and then ask, “I’m a good eater, too, Miss Johnson?” Contrast the “good eater” statement with a descriptive statement such as, “You know how to use that serving spoon to pick up those potatoes.” “You tried getting the beans on your fork three times, and then you got them on the fork. You worked hard at finding out how to do that.”

Question

Is there a research base for using descriptive reinforcement over praise?

Answer

Yes, there is evidence that young children’s skills are best supported by descriptive statements about the process they use as they learn, and about their level of effort. Elementary age children are best supported by descriptive statements about the process and activity they do, and not so much the effort they put forth.



Teacher Talk

Descriptive Reinforcement and Encouragement

Janice Fletcher, EdD and Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

Setting a mealtime environment to promote competence and self-control in children is a goal of many early childhood programs. The things adults say to children have impact on their motivation to try new things and to become competent and self-controlled.

Intentional and thoughtfully planned teacher talk can be descriptively reinforcing for children as they learn.

Assist self-regulation. Help children think about what they are doing. Rather than saying, "I think you are such a good girl for helping out with snack," it is more effective to say, "It looks like you are finishing cutting the pizza. You cut up five pieces of pizza. You made something for everyone to eat."

Be specific. Describe the mealtime task the child is doing. Reinforce what children are accomplishing by specifically describing their action. "You are using the soap and hot water. You are scrubbing your hands. You cleaned the fronts and backs of your hands." This leads the child through the challenge and at the same time focuses her on what is working. Intentionally decide what skills you are hoping to reinforce. Then choose the actions you will descriptively reinforce.

Avoid insincere or empty evaluative comments. Too much empty discussion about a child's attempts and accomplishments results in feelings of emptiness. Adjectives such as "good" and "bad" give little information to a child about the tasks that they are working on acquiring. Be specific and descriptive in your comments.

Avoid comparisons between children as you describe behaviors. Make comparisons about the child's skills over time, rather than about the child's skills in relation to someone else's skills. "You are the best meat cutter in the school," is an inappropriate comparison because it sets an almost impossible standard for the child to meet. "You cut your meat without any help today," is descriptive and targeted to the child's skill.

Give private feedback. Children may be placed in groups for society's purposes, but learning is an individual effort. Look for the tasks that a child is working on, then, give him descriptive reinforcements as he attempts the tasks.

Think about building a child's sense of self-control, independence, competence, and confidence around eating and mealtimes in the group setting. Watch for successes. Help the child identify eating success through descriptive reinforcement, and watch the confidence rise. A logical sequence unfolds. A risk is taken and successfully achieved, competence is established, confidence follows, and another risk is ready to be taken.