



{inclusion outreach}

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[www.inclusionoutreach.ca](http://www.inclusionoutreach.ca)

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### Mealtime Inclusion Strategies

Students with eating difficulties require individualized input and strategies to eat safely and effectively at school. A Speech-Language Pathologist and/or Occupational Therapist will develop a safe eating plan to meet the student's unique needs. Sometimes the other aspects of mealtime experiences can get overlooked. Aside from nutrition, mealtimes provide valuable learning, communication, social interaction, and regulation opportunities. Even for students who eat by a tube and do not consume any food by mouth, there is still value of inclusion in mealtime experiences.

Think of co-hosting a dinner party. If you were only involved in the portion of the meal where the food was consumed, you would be missing out on most aspects of the event, such as the planning, inviting guests, grocery shopping, cooking, setting the table, socializing, and clean up.



### LEARNING

- Shopping and meal preparation provide rich learning opportunities
- Students may learn how to read a recipe, plan a meal, budget, purchase the necessary ingredients, process food, or how food gets chemically changed with the cooking process
- If a student is learning to use a spoon or a cup, mealtime routines provide predictable opportunities for practice to develop further competence
- Learning to wipe their own face or tidy up their area of the table can develop important independence skills

Respect

Competence

Inclusion

Presence

Choice

Key words: lunch, meals, snack, feeding, eating, mealtime

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## COMMUNICATION

- For most students, mealtimes are highly motivating and there is a natural turn taking that occurs between the student and a person assisting the student with eating
- Choice making at mealtimes can allow the student to feel their choices are honoured. When the student feels respected, they are more willing to engage and communicate.

## SOCIAL

- Meals are great opportunities for less structured social time and community presence with classmates
- Think about shared mealtime experiences around your school community, such as pizza day, or popcorn day, or fun lunch. There may be components of the food that the student could eat, or they could experience the food with smell or touch, or even helping with handing out the food, or sitting at the table with their classmates to engage in the social aspect and conversations.
- If the student tends to be messy eater, educate others about how the student is learning to eat. Towels or bandanas can be good alternatives to bibs.
- For older students, community presence often includes learning social rules about waiting to be seated at a restaurant or ordering food at a café.

## REGULATION

- Fulfilling students' hunger and thirst is a foundational regulation need
- Consuming favourite food and drink can bring joy and quality of life to students
- For students that solely eat by a tube, exploring sensory experiences through touch and smell of food can also bring pleasure and joy. Students can make food for friends and family, while experiencing co-regulation with those they make food for.

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