

Mealtime Conversation in Alberta Child Care Centres^{*}

A Needs Assessment Study

Background:

- Meaningful mealtime conversations can facilitate a relaxed and pleasant mealtime environment and help to develop healthy eating and social skills for children.¹
- Child care programs are an important setting to promote pleasant mealtime conversations. Positive modelling in child care settings can also result in increased conversations at home.²



Objective:

- To explore the strengths and challenges facing Alberta child care professionals related to engaging in positive, meaningful mealtime conversations with pre-schoolers (aged 2-5 years) in their care with a focus towards potential support strategies.

Methods:

- A literature review and environmental scan were conducted to identify the strengths and barriers facing child care educators in North America.
- A key informant interview and two child educator focus groups (n=5) in Alberta, Canada were used to gain insight on the current practices of mealtime conversations in Alberta, strengths and barriers facing educators, and identify best support strategies.
- This study is part of a larger project "CHEERS VCoP: Raising Healthy Kids" and approved by MRU HREB (#100367)



Results:

- Alberta child care educator focus groups identified these top 3 strengths and challenges:

Strengths	Challenges
1. Assigned eating areas: - This helps children to focus on the food and on each other.	1. Educator nutrition knowledge: - Lack of understanding of what meaningful table conversations that promote healthy eating and healthy development look like.
2. Educators sitting with children at mealtimes: - This provides opportunity for role-modeling table manners and healthy eating.	2. Educator language/communication skills: - Lack of English fluency to initiate and/or engage in more complex conversations.
3. Educator awareness of the social aspect of mealtimes: - Recognition of the benefits of conversation is the first step to action.	3. Lack of conversation ideas: - Trouble thinking up of conversation ideas/starters amongst the chaos of mealtimes.

- Alberta child care educator focus groups identified these potential support strategies:

Sample Conversation Starters

1. Increase staff training on the topic
2. Provide sample conversation starters
3. Provide support to mitigate the busyness of mealtimes



Implications & Conclusions:

- While child care professionals in Alberta are recognizing mealtimes as important social and learning opportunities, educators experience barriers to lead positive and meaningful mealtime conversations with preschoolers in their care.
- Potential support strategies have been suggested to inform future work to develop resources and support in this area.

Results:

- Currently, research has shown a lack of meaningful mealtime conversation both across home and child care settings in North America, in which adult-child communications are:
 1. Generally lacking;³
 2. Largely disciplinary, instructional and/or assistance in nature;³
 3. Highly prevalent in remarks to attempt controlling food intake.⁴
- This type of communication impacts the mealtime environment and can be detrimental to children's attention to internal cues of hunger and fullness.⁴

References:

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2. Jewett, J., & Clark, H. B. (1979). Teaching preschoolers to use appropriate dinnertime conversation: An analysis of generalization from school to home. Association for Advancement of Behaviour Therapy, 10, 589-605.
3. Holmes, R. M. (2011). "Do you like Doritos?": Preschoolers' table talk during lunchtime. Early Child Development and Care, 181(3), 413-424.
4. Ramsay, S. A., Brannen, L. J., Fletcher, J., Price, E., Johnson, S. L., & Sigman-Grant, M. (2010). "Are you done?" Child care provider's verbal communication at mealtimes that reinforce or hinder children's internal cues of hunger and satiation. Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour, 45(4), 265-270.

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