The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) supports family style meal service in the child care setting. Serving a meal family style means offering food in serving bowls or dishes. Milk and other beverages are served in containers. The type of container will depend on state health and sanitation requirements. Children are encouraged to serve themselves, or serve themselves with help from an adult. Family style meals are good for both children and child care providers.

**Family style meals are good for children.**

**Children see food that looks good, and they know they can have some.** Children are often unsure about new foods. Seeing new foods and watching others serve themselves make them interested. They are more willing to try a small serving when they see other children trying new foods.

**Children can choose the amount of food they want to have on their plate.**
A large portion of food can turn children off because they may feel they have to eat more than they want. When foods are served family style, children may choose to take a small portion of food, knowing that the foods will still be available if they would like a second serving. Children feel more in control to judge their hunger and fullness during the meal, aware that more food is within easy reach.
Children practice fine motor skills and social skills during mealtime. Serving themselves give children time to practice skills like passing, pouring, and scooping foods. Taking turns, sharing, and politely turning down foods are all a part of the table manners children learn by the caregiver’s example.

Children do not see one food as more important than another. Since all foods for the meal are on the table together, children do not see one food as better than another. Food is not used as a reward or punishment since children have all foods available to them throughout the meal.

Family style meals are good for child care providers.

Children enjoy the company of their child care provider. Since all of the food is on the table before the meal begins, the children and the child care provider can enjoy the meal together.

Children are more relaxed. Children are relaxed during family style meals because they do not need to decide how much they want to eat before the meal begins. Since there is food on the table throughout the meal, children can judge what they want to eat and how much.

Food and beverages are at the table. When food and beverages are at the table, the child care provider does not need to leave children when a second serving is requested. Avoiding more trips to the kitchen helps family style meals to be relaxed.
Children practice good table manners and pleasant mealtime conversation. When the child care provider is able to eat with the children, the provider can model good table manners and guide children’s behavior to keep mealtime pleasant.

Special Note: When serving family style, all the food components of a reimbursable meal are on the table at the start of the meal service. Enough food is placed on the table to allow for the full CACFP portion size required for each child and adult to be served.

Keep It Clean—Keep It Cozy

Family Style Meals in the Child Care Setting
Family style meal service helps children feel more at home in child care. Here are several tips to help children handle foods safely, keep germs from spreading, and make mealtimes pleasant and safe.

• Clean and disinfect tables before the meal is served.

• Make sure children and adults wash their hands before the meal is served.

• Teach children to choose the piece of food they want by looking at it first.

• Remind children to take what they touch when serving themselves.

• Provide easy-to-use tongs, spoons, and scoops for serving foods.

• Teach children to pass serving bowls and dishes without putting their fingers into the bowls or touching the foods.

• Expect spills. Children are learning and accidents are normal. Keep clean-up cloths or paper towels handy and wipe up spills without a fuss.