

Especially for practitioners working with infants!

Mealtime Conversations

Vocalizing and Listening

Mealtimes can be especially good for encouraging “conversations” between yourself and young children. This practice guide includes ideas for turning mealtimes into opportunities for children to listen, “talk,” and engage in your turn/my turn interactions and conversations with you.

What is the practice?

This practice uses mealtimes for talking to infants and encouraging infants to vocalize and gesture to adults. It makes mealtime an enjoyable occasion for listening and communicating. The practice works best when you are feeding the child foods he especially likes. The more relaxing and enjoyable the activity, the more it will be a time for talking and communicating.

What does the practice look like?

Imagine a hungry infant seated in a highchair or an infant seat. The parent tells the child, “It’s time to eat!” The child gets excited and begins to open his mouth. The parent says, “Do you want some (child’s favorite food)?” The child gets even more excited. The parent feeds the child while saying, “Yum, yum, good.” The back-and-forth flow of the mealtime is filled with lots of talking, vocalizing, gestures, and excitement.



How do you do the practice?

The whole idea of this practice is to help the child become a conversational partner. Provide the child with opportunities to communicate things like, “I want more,” “I like the food,” and “talk to me some more” in whatever way he can. The ways in which the child communicates and becomes a conversational partner will depend on his age and interests.

- This activity works best when the child is hungry and in a comfortable position. Be attentive to the infant’s signals and signs that he wants to be fed.
- The activity also works best when you and the child are facing each other. Whether the child is in a high chair, an infant seat, or other seating device, it is important that he is comfortable. You may need to prop pillows or towels on either side of him to help him sit upright.
- Talk to the child in short sentences like, “It’s time to eat,” “I have your favorite food,” or “Okay! It’s chow time!” Ask simple questions: “Are you ready to eat?” and “Do you want more (child’s favorite food)?” The idea is to get the child excited about mealtimes and back-and-forth “talking” with you.
- Pay attention to anything the child does to “tell you” he wants more or wants your attention. Respond to any and all things he does to get you to continue the mealtime play and “conversation.” These can be gestures, sounds, or movements.
- Make the conversational exchanges fun and enjoyable. Spark your baby’s interest with feeding games—like using a spoon as an airplane!

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child anticipate being fed by opening his mouth?
- Does he communicate to you by getting excited or reaching out toward the food?
- Does he vocalize to try to get your attention?

Take a look at more mealtime conversations

Mealtime Back-and-Forth

If 8-month-old Ashley had her way, she would only eat applesauce! She gets so excited whenever she sees her favorite food that she coos, squeals, and yells with delight. Corrine, her caregiver, knows that this mealtime will have Ashley “talking up a storm.” Corrine tells Ashley, “I have your favorite food! Applesauce!” in an excited manner. Ashley immediately responds by getting excited and by vocalizing as loud as she can. Corrine puts Ashley in her highchair and says, “Open up. Here it comes!” Without hesitation, Ashley is “chomping at the bit” to get her first mouthful. “You like that, don’t you?” Corrine asks. The entire mealtime turns into a back-and-forth exchange between Corrine and Ashley, each playing her part in this delightful conversation.



Your-Turn/My-Turn

Seven-month-old Nathan will pretty much eat whatever is put in front of him. He will let you know in no uncertain terms that he is hungry! His home visitor suggests that because he likes to eat so much, mealtimes are a good chance to engage Nathan in back-and-forth communication. His father feeds Nathan while his son is in an infant seat sitting on the kitchen table. Dad puts some food on a spoon and begins feeding Nathan. He asks, “Do you like that? Do you want more?” Nathan says “Yes” by waving his arms and making movements with his lips. Dad says, “Let’s try some peaches. What do you think?” Next he asks, “What about some bananas? Is that a yes?” Throughout the meal, Dad always

describes what he is doing. He continues engaging Nathan in conversation by asking questions, as his home visitor suggested. This involves his son in a your-turn/my-turn exchange throughout the meal. It is clear that Nathan not only likes his food but truly enjoys this father-and-son time together.

Do You Want More?

Nicole has had difficulties taking liquids from a bottle ever since she was born. Mom has gotten advice from an early interventionist, who has helped her increase Nicole’s fluid intake. Mom noticed a while back that Nicole has started looking at her bottle or at her mom while being fed. Mom began experimenting with feeding time to see if she could make it more fun and enjoyable for her daughter. With Nicole nestled in her arms in a feeding position, Mom announces, “It is time for your bottle! Are you ready to eat?” Any time Nicole looks at the bottle or at mom, she puts the nipple in her daughter’s mouth. After about four or five sucks, mom removes the nipple and says, “That was good! Do you want more?” Nicole begins to make sucking movements and mom again puts the nipple in her daughter’s mouth. This has turned into a back-and-forth, your turn/my turn conversation. Nicole has figured out that looking, sucking, and making sounds gets mom to give her more to drink.

