

# Mealtime Opportunities for Quality Improvements in Early Learning Settings: Preschool

The following illustrates connections between ECERS-3 and CLASS Pre-K quality measures and ways to promote healthy mealtimes in early learning settings.

<b>Preschool: 3-5 years</b>		
<b>Quality Category</b>	<b>Example of Mealtime Activity</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Subscale: Space and Furnishings</b>		
ECERS-3 Item 2: Furnishings for care, play, and learning	<p>Have child-sized tables and chairs for mealtimes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>While seated back in a chair, children’s feet should be able to touch the floor. They should be able to rest their elbows on the table and fit their knees comfortably under the table.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having appropriately sized table and chairs ensure safety and allow children to be comfortable, engaged, and successful during mealtimes. This helps children be able to serve themselves and pass food, engage in social interactions, and limits distractions during mealtimes.</li> </ul>
<b>Subscale: Personal Care Routines</b>		
ECERS-3 Item 8: Meals/snacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sit with children during meals and group snacks.</li> <li>Encourage a pleasant social atmosphere and conversation time.</li> <li>Encourage children to eat independently with child-sized eating utensils.</li> <li>Encourage/support for children to help set the table, serve themselves with child-sized serving utensils, clean up spills, and offer hand and verbal assist when needed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adults sitting with children during meals is key to modeling appropriate eating and social interactions. When at the same table, staff can also quickly intervene and help with self-service, choking hazards, or spills.</li> <li>When children are able to serve themselves, they improve fine motor skills, learn how to eat in response to hunger and satiety, and gain confidence and independence.</li> </ul>
ECERS-3 Item 8: Meals/snacks  ECERS-3 Item 10: Health practices	<p>Adults and children wash hands before and after preparing or eating food.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children are taught proper hand-washing techniques.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adequate hand washing before and after eating helps prevent the spread of germs and disease.</li> <li>Handwashing is an important self-care skill.</li> <li>Handwashing includes a number of steps which helps children with sequential learning (a math skill)</li> </ul>

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
<b>Subscale: Language and Literacy</b>		
<p>CLASS Pre-K: Language Modeling</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 12: Helping children expand vocabulary</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 13: Encouraging children to use language</p>	<p>Use <i>specific comments</i> to help define foods using descriptive words.</p> <p>Examples of Specific Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The carrot is crunchy and orange.</li> <li>• The melon is soft and tastes sweet.</li> <li>• You can spread the hummus on the bread just like peanut butter.</li> <li>• This mango reminds me of a peach.</li> </ul> <p>Use <i>open-ended questions</i> such as “what do you like about the burrito?” to help children experience the food.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeating or extending children’s comments such as “Yes, the strawberry is juicy. It is sweet and juicy because it is a fruit. What other fruits do you like?”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How you talk to young children during mealtimes can help them develop reasoning skills. Mealtimes lend themselves towards using language to learn and communicate.</li> <li>• Taste and smell are important senses, and are prevalent during mealtimes. Use language about these senses to help children learn and remember new things.</li> </ul>
<p>ECERS-3 Item 12: Helping children expand vocabulary</p> <p>CLASS Pre-K: Concept Development</p>	<p>Make connections about what children are eating to a related lesson or classroom activity they have done.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earlier in the day children learned to compare textures using the sensory table...smooth, rough, wrinkly, hard, soft etc. During mealtime, identify foods with different textures.</li> </ul> <p><i>This also applies well to some activities such as Science/Nature and Math/Number.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repetition of concepts strengthens working memory and the ability to use learned information in various ways and contexts.</li> </ul>

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
<b>Subscale: Language and Literacy (page 2)</b>		
<p>ECERS-3 Item 12: Helping children expand vocabulary</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 13: Encouraging children to use language</p> <p>CLASS Pre-K: Concept Development</p>	<p>Promote staff-child conversations during meals or snack time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask children questions about the food they are eating and what they like to eat as well as other topics, like what they did over the weekend and what activities they like to do. Listen to their responses.</li> <li>• Hold turn-taking conversations with children “What are you putting on your plate today? (Pause to give the child time to respond) Yes! You chose three crackers. I took some crackers too”</li> <li>• Encourage children to describe how they are feeling regarding hunger and fullness as they are serving themselves food.</li> <li>• Make connections with children’s actions and how they might be feeling: “I see you are playing with your fork or getting up and down; etc. You must be getting full.” “Everyone is quietly eating. You all must be hungry.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is natural and easy to have staff-child conversations while eating together.</li> <li>• Meals lend themselves to frequent opportunities to ask children what they are eating or describe what they are learning about food, taste, and their bodies.</li> <li>• When children learn to relate feelings about hunger and satiety to specific behaviors, they are learning how to self-regulate.</li> </ul>
<p>ECERS-3 Item 13: Encouraging children to use language</p> <p>CLASS Pre-K: Concept Development</p>	<p>Encourage children to try foods but do not force them to eat something they do not want to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use positive language to remind them that we all can learn to like foods, even if you do not like it today.</li> </ul> <p><i>This connection also applies to Interactions</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hesitation to try new foods, or foods they have not liked, is common among young children. It can take offering and trying a new food up to 20 times before a child decides that they like it. Seeing other children and adults try the food can be helpful, as well as being given the chance to say “no thank you” and to try again on another day.</li> </ul>

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
<b>Subscale: Language and Literacy (page 3)</b>		
ECERS-3 Item 14: Staff use of books with children	Provide a selection of books about food and eating related topics, such as where food comes from, taste and smells, and foods eaten by people around the world.	
ECERS-3 Item 15: Encouraging children's use of books	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Harvest for Healthy Kids curriculum</a> provides some ideas for books:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The Vegetables We Eat by Gail Gibbons</li> <li>○ Tops &amp; Bottoms by Janet Stevens</li> <li>○ Up Down and Around by Katherine Ayres</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <a href="#">Readerstoeaters.com</a> is another resource</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote children's interest in books through connecting stories with food and mealtime experiences. This technique can help promote children's comprehension and interest in food.</li> <li>• Learning about a new food from a book or story can help children easier accept or try it when it is offered during a meal.</li> <li>• Books are also a great way to learn about foods in different cultures around the world.</li> </ul>
ECERS-3 Item 16: Becoming familiar with print	Use pictures in the classroom and electronic media materials to help children understand where food comes from and how food can look differently than when it is on our plates.	
ECERS-3 Item 21: Dramatic play (Learning Activities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bread is made from flour, which comes from wheat and grains.</li> <li>• Mashed potatoes vs a potato vs a potato plant. Apple seed, apple tree/blossom, apple etc.</li> </ul>	
ECERS-3 Item 27: Appropriate use of technology (Learning Activities)	<i>This connection also applies to Learning Activities</i>	

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<b>Subscale: Learning Activities</b>		
ECERS-3 Item 22: Nature/science	<p>Maintain or visit a garden or farm to help children learn about nature and where food comes from.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have children plant seeds, care for them, and watch them grow.</li> <li>• Have children help pick vegetables from a garden that are later used in a meal.</li> <li>• Let children explore a piece of fruit or vegetable from a garden in class. Touch, feel, smell, describe, etc.</li> </ul> <p>Helpful resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Farm to ECE</a> -</li> <li>• <a href="#">Harvest for Healthy Kids</a></li> </ul> <p>Cooking and tasting can be used as a simple science experiment and create great hands-on learning experiences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children can help make smoothies and can learn about how solid food can be made into a liquid food or how adding foods together can change flavor.</li> <li>• Taste test fresh herbs (could be from the garden!) that are then added to foods children eat, i.e. taste a mint leave and add fresh mint to mango salsa or yogurt dip; taste an oregano leave and add fresh oregano to spaghetti sauce</li> <li>• Taste test fresh and dried versions of dill, oregano, parsley</li> <li>• Show how herbs can be dried and stored (water is removed as herbs are hung up to dry...etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hands-on and engaging experiences about science and nature are abundant with food and eating related topics. Harvest for Healthy Kids provides materials and curriculum for learning about fruits and vegetables.</li> <li>• Young children often have a hard time trying and accepting new foods, especially vegetables. Hands-on experiences and learning more about the food before it is on the table increases the likelihood a child will try the food.</li> <li>• Teaching about how herbs can be used in fresh and dried form to flavor other foods shows children how plant forms change and how versatile they can be in cooking/eating</li> </ul>
ECERS-3 Item 22: Nature/science	<p>Provide sand and water play with a variety of cups, containers, tools, and pitchers to promote fine motor development and practice skills that can be used during meals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage children to practice passing heavy bowls or containers of sand, pour water into a small cup, and scoop sand onto a dish or surface.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be successful at serving themselves food during a meal, children need to practice these fine motor skills outside of mealtimes. Sand and water play stations provide a great opportunity to practices these skills, such as passing, pouring, scooping, etc.</li> </ul>

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
<b>Subscale: Learning Activities (page 2)</b>		
<p>ECERS-3 Item 23: Math materials and activities</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 24: Math in daily events</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make connections between math materials/activities and meal times. For instance, make a chart to quantify what children ate for breakfast or lunch.</li> <li>• Incorporate math concepts, like counting and fractions, into meal times. For instance, have children count how many carrots or apple slices they have served themselves, or show how portion sizes (such as half an apple) relate to fractions.</li> <li>• Challenge older children (e.g. aged 4+) with more complex math-related tasks during meals or snacks, such as counting how many napkins or plates are needed at the table</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mealtimes are natural opportunities for children to practice counting and learn math skills. Practicing these concepts during a meal adds an element of fun – eating!</li> <li>• Connecting eating with math skills also helps to reinforce working memory.</li> </ul>
<p>ECERS-3 Item 26: Promoting Acceptance of Diversity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively promote acceptance of children with varying skill levels and abilities to feed themselves during mealtimes.</li> <li>• Modify the environment and assist as needed to enable children with disabilities to participate in mealtimes with self-serving and conversations with their typical peers.</li> <li>• Serve foods that are common to the ethnic groups of children in the classroom; i.e. hummus and pita bread; corn tortillas and salsa/bean dip; soba noodles and tofu. Ask family members to visit and explain how these foods are eaten in their culture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including children with disabilities in mealtimes with their typically-developing peers sends the important message that children of differing abilities can all enjoy a meal together.</li> <li>• When parents make presentations to the class about culture, children learn to be accepting of the different backgrounds and lifestyle habits of their classmate</li> </ul> <p>Note here: parents cannot prepare meals out of the child care and bring them in. Also, unless they are staff and have a food workers’ permit, they cannot prepare meals or foods in the child care. They CAN bring in a recipe for the cook to make and visit/participate in the mealtime.</p>

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<b>Subscale: Interaction</b>		
<p>CLASS: Regard for student perspectives</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 29: Individualized teaching and learning</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 30: Staff-child interactions</p>	<p>Practice family style dining where adults decide what food is available and how it is presented, and children decide what and how much to eat by serving themselves and following their internal cues.</p> <p>Here are some tips that can be helpful when having children serve themselves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select a variety of foods to serve to children</li> <li>• Present foods in a way that is easy for children to serve, based on their current skill level</li> <li>• Sit and eat with children during mealtimes, model how to serve and eat foods</li> <li>• Provide hand-over-hand and verbal assistance as necessary</li> <li>• Use child-size serving utensils, bowls, tables, and chairs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When children are allowed to serve themselves and choose how much to eat, they develop independence, feel safe, and learn how to eat the right amount for them on any given day. It also shows them that you value and listen to their perspective and voice, which provides emotional support.</li> <li>• Adults sitting with children during meals is key to modeling appropriate eating and social interactions. When at the same table, providers can also quickly intervene and help with self-service, choking hazards, or spills.</li> </ul>
<p>CLASS Pre-K: Regard for student perspectives</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 30: Staff-child interactions</p>	<p>Make <b>process centered</b> comments about children’s behaviors and internal feelings of hunger and fullness:</p> <p><b>Process Centered:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You asked for more peaches and now you want more cereal. You must be hungry for breakfast this morning.”</li> <li>• “You picked up your carrot. You smelled it. You tasted it. You took a bite and chewed it all up. Then...you said you liked it. You are learning to try new foods.”</li> <li>• You are getting out of your chair and have put your fork down. Your tummy must be getting full. You must be done eating.</li> </ul> <p><i>This connection also applies to Language and Literacy</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reference internal hunger and fullness cues during meals to help teach children how to listen to their body and develop healthy habits. Prompting children to consider their internal hunger and fullness cues helps them to think about and talk about reasons behind their actions. It also shows them that you value and respect their perspective and feelings.</li> <li>• Process centered comments helps children acquire words and language that reflect their own behaviors and internal feelings of hunger and fullness. Children are then better able to describe their needs and wants around eating, decreasing conflicts and struggles at the table.</li> </ul>

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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
<b>Subscale: Interaction (page 2)</b>		
ECERS-3 Item 32: Discipline  ECERS-3 Item 30: Staff-child interactions  CLASS Pre-K: Behavior management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make meal and snack times a pleasant, shared, social activity. Do not use food to promote good behavior or discourage bad behavior with rewards and punishments.</li> <li>• Help children feel safe to try new foods, try serving themselves, help with setting the table or cleaning up, and talking to others at the table.</li> <li>• With young children serving themselves and eating, there will be messes and spills; stay positive and help children when these occur.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the aspects of a positive climate can be supported through adults and children sharing meals and snacks together.</li> <li>• Adult and children sharing a meal together can involve peer assistance, provide opportunities for matching affect, and can spark social conversations. Eating and talking together during mealtime are valuable ways to build positive relationships.</li> <li>• Further, a positive affect can be strengthened through doing mealtime related transition activities before and after meals together. Adults and children can naturally smile, laugh, and show enthusiasm when doing tasks like setting the table, washing hands, or clearing up dishes.</li> </ul>
CLASS Pre-K: Behavior management  ECERS-3 Item 31: Peer Interaction	Use mealtimes to teach social skills. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social skills such as turn taking, passing dishes, saying please and thank you, working together toward a common goal (setting or cleaning the table), social conversation norms, and negotiating conflicts can all be practiced and developed during mealtimes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social skills are strong predictors of success as older children and adults. Young children need much assistance and practice in learning these social skills. Mealtimes are wonderful opportunities for children to practice and learn these skills.</li> </ul>



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Quality Category	Example of Mealtime Activity	Rationale
<b>Subscale: Program Structure</b>		
<p>CLASS Pre-K: Behavior management</p> <p>ECERS-3 Item 33: Transitions and waiting times</p>	<p>Try incorporating these items into your meal and snack time routine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear the table of non-food items and get ready for the meal or snack</li> <li>• Help set the table</li> <li>• Wash hands</li> <li>• Sing a gratitude song, say a phrase, or do deep breathing activities to calm and focus children before mealtimes</li> </ul> <p>Clean-up after the meal is finished:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask children to clear their place, take plates, and eating utensils to a specified area, wash hands and go to specific area.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children thrive on routines and predictable sequences of activities as they help establish behavioral expectations and consistency. Mealtimes are great opportunities to build in routines and develop structure.</li> </ul>

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## Citations:

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## This ECERS-3 and CLASS Pre-K Crosswalk with Mealtime Opportunities was created by:

Victoria A. Bradford, MPH, CHES, Research Coordinator, University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition

Adrienne Dorf, MPH, RD, CD, Healthiest Next Generation Program Manager, Washington State Department of Children, Youth, & Families

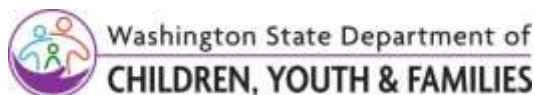
Katy Levenhagen, MS, RDN, Nutritionist, Child Care Health Outreach Program, Snohomish Health District

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