

Early Childhood Education

The Benefits of Family Style Dining

Featuring the Stoler Early Childhood Education Center

Family Style Dining is one of the newest trends in the fight against childhood obesity. It has been found to be especially effective with young children when they are presented with healthy food offerings paired with the opportunity to serve themselves. It is a tactic that Christine Sigman, RN, Director of Healthy Choices Programming at the Stoler ECE in Owings Mills, has implemented as part of the school's Healthy Choices initiative.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recently reported on the success of our ECE's family dining effort, sharing our story with over 11, 500 preschools and childcare centers across the country.

Sigman explains that, "In the process of serving themselves, children learn fine motor skills as they pass bowls and use tongs." Of course child-sized tongs, utensils and bowls are necessary for smaller hands and consequently allow children to feel confident in serving themselves. The sense of taking responsibility for their meal time is one more step toward a sense of independence for preschoolers.

Another aspect of family style dining is the idea of children waiting for each other to take their individual servings, which encourages patience and embraces sharing. If parents decide to use the idea at home, this is the perfect time to discuss their day as they take time to learn how to use the utensils.

Sigman also says that "children learn to take what they feel they're hungry for and gauge how much food they need on their plates." If you try this at home, encourage children to try new foods by putting small amounts on their plates to taste. They can always take more if they like it. Try to encourage a well-rounded sampling of each dish in the process. Don't force them to eat what they don't like, but encourage them to at least try what they don't like from time to time as children's tastes evolve. And be sure to have lots of paper towels and a smile on hand for the inevitable spills.

Healthy Choices is a program developed by the Stoler Early Childhood Education center housed in the Owings Mills JCC. It was one of twelve preschool programs nationwide recognized by First Lady Michelle Obama's anti-obesity initiative, Let's Move! Childcare Challenge. The curriculum encourages kids to move more and eat lots of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and healthy protein. As part of Healthy Choices, all snacks and meals at the preschool are served in this family style dining format.

If you'd like to learn more about this program for your child or grandchild please schedule a tour with Ilene Meister at 410.559.3554.

