

# Mastering Meals Step-by-step

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To take care of yourself and others with food, you must have meals. To have meals and to *keep* having them, your meals must be filling and good-tasting. You need to get enough to eat of food you enjoy. To have meals, start where you are. Which item below best describes what you can surely do with meals? Once you get used to doing what you do with meals, move on to the next step. If you want to. You don't *have* to.



1. **Don't have meals? Don't want them?** That is up to you. Keep in mind we aren't talking about cooking from scratch, having "fresh" food, or eating food you are "supposed to" but don't enjoy. We are talking about *structure*. A meal is when you sit down and eat, by yourself or with others.
2. **Get the meal habit.**<sup>2</sup> Eat what you are eating now, just have it at regular meal- and snack-times. Make meals your idea, at more or less set times. Don't just have meals when your or somebody's else's hunger strikes. Make meals you enjoy, with food that fills you up. That will let you forget about food until the next time to eat.

**Use snacks to support mealtime.** Children and grown-ups need to come to meals hungry and ready to eat, but not so hungry they can't wait. Have snacks at set times about halfway between meals. Don't let family members have food or drinks between times—except for water.

3. **Do a little planning.**<sup>3</sup> Start by knowing in the morning what to have for dinner. Then figure out meals for a day or a few days ahead. When you have a new food, also have food that you know and enjoy. Eat—or not. Even if you choose it and cook it, you might not want to eat it—this time.

4. **Add on, don't take away.**<sup>4</sup> Once you have the meal habit, you may get tired of the same foods all the time. Add on to what you are eating now. Go slowly, and make only one change at a time. To calm down family members who get upset by anything new, point out that their favorites are still there. Tell them they don't have to eat anything they don't want to. Maintain a division of responsibility. You do the *what, when* and *where of feeding*, they do the *how much* and *whether of eating*.

**Make wise use of "forbidden" food.** Include chips or fries at mealtime as often as you want them, and eat as much as you want. For children, limit dessert to one serving so it doesn't compete with the meal. Regularly include sweets at snack time, and let your child eat as many cookies as she wants. Do the same yourself.

5. **Don't get caught in the food rules.**<sup>5</sup> Having meals can make you think about good-food, bad-food rules. Don't do it! Those rules get in the way of having meals and can make them a chore and a bore. To keep up the work of having meals, you need to enjoy planning, cooking and eating them.

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**For more about** eating, feeding, and family meals, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*.



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## FACILITATOR PAGE: Not to be handed out to participants

**Basis is Satter's Food Hierarchy.** To prepare yourself for this lesson plan, read [Satter, E. Hierarchy of Food Needs JNEB 2007](#). For a discussion of applying Satter's food hierarchy, See [Practicing Nutritional Judo](#). Based on the food hierarchy principles, here is how to do nutrition education with the [Satter Eating Competence Model \(ecSatter\)](#).

- Address basic food needs: 1) To get enough to eat, and 2) To eat food that they enjoy. These needs *must* be satisfied in order for your participant to learn and grow.
- Wait for them to evolve. If they have long experienced food insecurity and/or guilt-ridden eating, it will take months or years for them to reassure themselves that their basic food needs will be satisfied.
- Anticipate pickiness. Hunger makes everything taste good. Reliably satisfying hunger lets food likes and dislikes appear.
- Both support and neutralize novel food. Wait for them to initiate trying new food. Reassure them they don't have to.
- Follow their lead with instrumental food. They do not have to get to this level. The *novel food* level supports dietary quality, as does the *planning* level. From the EC perspective, considering instrumental food is a both-and issue, not an either-or one. The task is choosing good-tasting food that also happens to be good-for-you food.

**Support experiential learning: a process of discovery.** Don't teach or tell. The people with whom we work know more than we do about their lives and challenges. Dignify their achievements. Trust them, and assume they do the best they can, given their life circumstances.

**Individuals.** Work toward the shared goal of getting the meal habit. Support wherever they are in the sequence (and mean it). Let them learn and grow at their own pace.

**Groups.** Let them read through page 1, or turn page 1 into slides. Invite group members to say which step best describes their mealtime process. Accept where they are, invite them to share tips, and discuss what works.

<sup>2</sup> *Be firm about structure. Bless whatever they eat.* Point out its nutritional value. You are neutralizing shame and self-criticism. Being ashamed of food gets in the way of being deliberate and reliable about eating and feeding. The rudiments of meals will likely be there—the idea is to put together *their* foods, however unlikely the combinations, and provide those put-together meals at predictable times. If they are able to establish structure, *no matter what they choose to eat*, their nutritional status and ability to internally regulate food intake will improve. Achieving structure could require months or even years.

Managing snacks makes meals intrinsically rewarding: Hungry people enjoy their food and assign greater value to mealtime. Having others eat and enjoy their food supports the cook.

<sup>3</sup> *Planning* reassures them they will get enough to eat and have food they enjoy. Don't abuse planning. It is to reinforce structure, not to complicate meals.

<sup>4</sup> *Add on, don't take away* becomes useful as people tire of eating the same food over and over. On their own, they experiment with increased food variety: a new food every now and again, starting to enjoy it, and addressing negativity about food all increase dietary variety. Arriving at the *add on* step may take couple of years or more. If they do arrive.

"Forbidden food" shows up here but you can teach it at any step where food value judgments come up. To keep struggles about forbidden foods from undermining structure, encourage deliberately including them.

<sup>5</sup> Discard your agenda to get people to eat certain types or amounts of food. Your priority is building the individual's Eating Competence based on their own food selection values and priorities. You are not trying to build adherence to the Dietary guidelines.

For more about eating, feeding, and family meals, see Ellyn Satter's [Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family](#).



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