

# Mastering Meals Step-By-Step

To take care of yourself and others with food, it is important to have regular, reliable meals. To have meals and keep having them, day after day, you need to get enough to eat of food you enjoy. To have meals, start where you are. Take it step-by-step, and move along at your own pace.



1

**Re-Think Mealtime.** Don't have meals? Don't want them? Keep in mind we aren't talking about cooking from scratch, preparing only "fresh" food, or eating food you are "supposed" to eat but don't enjoy. We are talking about *structure*. A meal is when you sit down to eat, either by yourself or when you share food with others. Period.

2

**Get the meal habit.** Start by having the same foods you eat now, just have them at regular meal and snack times. Make meals you enjoy with foods that fill you up. Include "forbidden food" at meals or snacks. Eating as much as you want of food you enjoy will let you to feel satisfied enough to forget about food until the next meal or snack time. Help everybody wait for meals by having sit-down snacks between times.

3

**Do a little planning.** Start by knowing in the morning what you might have for lunch or dinner. Then try figuring out meals a day or two ahead of time. When you introduce a new food, also include a food that you and others know and enjoy at that meal. Eat—or not. Even if you choose food and cook it, you might not want to eat it—this time.

4

**Add on, don't take away.** Once you have the meal habit you may tire of your usual food. Add on foods one at a time. Consider canned peaches with the pizza or carrot sticks with the chicken nuggets. Calm down family members who get upset by new food: Point out that their favorites are still there, and they don't have to eat anything they don't want to. Maintain the Satter Division of Responsibility in Feeding: You decide *what, when* and *where* to feed, they decide how *much* and *whether* to eat.

5

**Keep it enjoyable.** Getting the meal habit can get you caught in good-food bad-food thinking. Don't do it! Such thinking gets in the way of having meals and can make meals a chore or a bore. To keep up the work and routine of having meals, you need to enjoy planning, cooking, and eating them!

**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. To keep desserts from being the only thing children eat, offer one serving of dessert and let children eat it before, during, or after the meal. Include sweets regularly at sit-down snacks, and let your child eat as much as they want. Do the same yourself.

**Use snacks to support mealtime.** Children and adults need to arrive at meals hungry and ready to eat, but not so hungry they can't wait. Have snacks at set times about halfway between meals. Let family members have water (not foods or sweetened drinks) between meals and snacks.

## **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 both-and, not either-or. 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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

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.