

# Making mealtimes meaningful

by Anita Homewood



*I have been invited to write about the way in which our team approaches mealtimes. It seems that mealtimes have become a source of discussion in recent months. What follows has been the result of a year long review in our centres, with subsequent implementation - and this is on-going. This context involves two different centres with a separate infant and toddler area in each: "Pukeko" has eight children and three staff, and "Tui" has 12 children with four staff.*

Mealtimes are such a valuable time for infants and toddlers. All too often, these moments are lost in the hustle and bustle of the day. One tends to see mealtimes as something to endure and race through in order to move on to the 'real' learning. But much can be learnt on such occasions. I suppose the question being raised for us is how do we make mealtimes meaningful, not only for infants and toddlers, but also for caregivers? What messages are we conveying to infants and toddlers with respect to mealtimes?

The team has been following the Pikler approach closely, and embraces the philosophy of respect outlined in the writings of Magda Gerber (1991, cited in Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer-Eyer, 2004). The environment is set up to allow infants and toddlers freedom of movement and empowerment through making their own choices. Hence, our aim for mealtimes was to make them a positive, enjoyable, meaningful time for infants, toddlers and caregivers. We wanted to ensure mealtimes were respectful and inclusive for all.

The process of mealtimes begins with infants having their meal while on the laps of their primary caregivers. This provides an opportunity for touch and intimacy between infant and caregiver, where the infant may gain a sense of security and warmth, and where they receive undivided attention.

When able to sit up strongly, the infants sit in a small chair at a small table. The chair is designed to allow infants to sit with their feet on the ground and have their backs supported. This is vital in encouraging the development of their balance and finding their centre of gravity, which is beneficial for their overall physical development. Eventually, the infant progresses from a chair to a small round stool. The stool is used to encourage the toddler to sit up straight, promoting and strengthening the core muscles, which are vital for good posture.

## **Children sitting at the table, feet flat on the ground.**

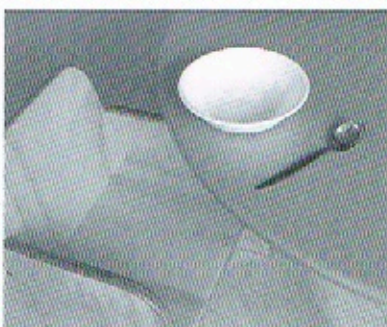
The one to one time between infant and caregiver continues, before they move to a small group of up to four children. The small group makes for a more intimate mealtime, with an adult always present with the children. It may be necessary to have a few sittings of different children for each meal. This can work to an advantage, the premise being that not all children are hungry at the same time. The children understand that they will not be overlooked, and find other experiences in which to be involved until a space becomes available, or until they are ready for their meal.



**Children sitting at the table, feet flat on the ground**

Some of the children are enjoying a relaxed mealtime, while others are busy elsewhere.

In terms of establishing a healthy attitude to food and eating, children are able to help themselves to whatever is on offer on the plate, and given time to try out new foods. The children are given the opportunity to acquire the skills that go hand in hand with healthy eating. Meals are served in china bowls, with 'real' cutlery. Water is the beverage of the day, and



**Meals are served in china bowls, with 'real' cutlery**

children are able to drink from their cups without lids from a very young age. By gradually moving away from plastic to using 'family' utensils and dishes, the children begin to develop the concept of weight and volume, and temperature, for example with china bowls, and are entrusted to use them respectfully.





A small group of children enjoying a relaxed mealtime

**Toddlers are encouraged to develop self-help skills, with someone there for support.**

Throughout the process, children are empowered by their participation, and for the most part, initiate their involvement. This occurs by them going to wash their hands, and setting their own place at the table, cleaning themselves up (with a little support), putting away their flannels and bibs, and putting away their chairs<sup>1</sup>. It is exciting to see the sense of ownership and responsibility in children so young – they are able to show us how capable and competent they are when given the opportunity.

The role of the caregiver throughout this process is to facilitate children's participation, to provide undivided attention, and role model respect for each meal. By being present during mealtimes, children know that they can depend on someone to be there to



Putting a stool away

provide support where necessary. It is also a wonderful opportunity for interaction between caregiver and children, something Magda Gerber terms "wants-something quality time" (1991, cited in Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer-Eyer, p. 7).

It is amazing to see how mealtimes can be such a valuable experience for children. It is a moment during a child's day where there is so much potential for the child's learning. So when it comes time to review and reflect on this process, it may be helpful to remember the following (SMART):

**Small** – limit the group to three or four children, with an adult present to supervise while the children are eating.

**Model** – the caregiver is not only present to supervise, but also to model the appropriate behaviour at the table, showing respect and talking children through the process, encouraging good eating habits and a positive attitude to food.

**Attend** to the children who are eating. Sometimes it is easy to be distracted by what is happening away from the table, so it may be necessary to look at where caregivers are situated during mealtimes.

**Recognise** children's cues. If they want more, they will let you know. If they have had enough to eat, they are free to leave the table.



Putting away flannels and bibs

**Trust** – allow children opportunities to be involved in the process, set up an environment where children feel supported, valued and included.

Most importantly, take time. Allow children time to 'be' and enjoy each other and their food. These times are also for social conversations when the sharing of others' lives occurs.

The entire process, from preparation to putting away, is an enriching experience for infants and toddlers, and may be seen as a positive and enjoyable time for all.

**References**

Gonzalez-Mena, J and Widmeyer-Eyer, D. (2004). *Infants, toddlers and caregivers: A curriculum of respectful, responsive care and education* (6th ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Ministry of Education. (1996) *Te Whāriki: whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

<sup>1</sup> Furniture is available for order in NZ from Starex.