



# Smarter Mealtimes

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It's Not Nutrition  
Until It's Eaten!



# Welcome

## Greetings!

The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement National Office is pleased to present the National Smarter Mealtimes Handbook. In response to requests from child care providers and partners across the country, this handbook provides child care programs with the knowledge, motivation, and support needed to build a mealtime environment that makes the healthy choice the easy choice for all children.

Child nutrition programs in your town are demonstrating great commitment to improving children's diets. Over 4.2 million children receive nutritious meals as a part of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Meals served through CACFP contain a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and milk. The research-based practices of Smarter Mealtimes can help child care programs improve selection and consumption of healthy foods under the new and improved CACFP meal pattern.

Substantial research on influencing children's choices at mealtime comes from the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (B.E.N. Center), home of the Smarter Lunchrooms Movement National Office. Working with other experts in the science of consumer behavior and food psychology, we have been conducting research to examine how to influence children's food choices in education and child care settings since 2009. Early research quickly identified key elements of behavioral economics - the study of how the social and physical environment influences decisions - that can effectively influence children's food selection and consumption at mealtime. This research is translated into the real-world child care environment through the Smarter Mealtimes Movement.

Research on how to improve children's selection and consumption of healthy foods at mealtime continues today in child care programs around the country. From Maine to Mississippi to Minnesota, child care programs are adopting these research-based strategies. States across the nation have begun the statewide promotion of Smarter Mealtimes strategies to increase consumption of healthy food and decrease food waste. Will you be the next child care program to join the movement? Read on to support your child care program in building a Smarter Mealtime that prepares children for a lifetime of nutrition and healthy habits.

In good health,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Just".

Dr. David Just, Director, Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Wansink".

Dr. Brian Wansink, Co-Director, Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics



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## Updates to this handbook:

Initially released in winter 2017, this handbook is a living document that will be updated online as new research and ideas are collected. Updates to the print version will be made in January and June. You can always find the latest content on our website at [www.SmarterLunchrooms.org](http://www.SmarterLunchrooms.org).



# The Smarter Mealtimes Movement

## Nudging Kids to Eat Healthier



Smarter Mealtimes is a nationwide movement based on proven strategies for nudging kids to select and eat the healthiest foods at mealtime. Smarter Mealtimes is dedicated to providing caregivers the knowledge, motivation, and resources needed to build a lunchroom environment that makes *the healthy choice the easy choice.*

### The Smarter Mealtimes Movement...

- Is easy and inexpensive to implement
- Increases children's satisfaction with meals
- Uses simple evidence-based strategies to gently nudge children to make healthy choices
- Empowers, energizes, and engages child care providers
- Increases the amount of healthy food children eat
- Reduces waste



### 5 Easy Smarter Mealtime Changes

- Pair cut vegetables with low fat dip
- Offer at least 2 types of fruit and 2 types of vegetables
- Offer fruits and vegetables first and last during mealtime
- Use stickers of popular characters to promote healthy options
- Provide fun, creative, descriptive names to fruits, vegetables, and main dishes



**It's Not Nutrition Until It's Eaten!**

# The Smarter Mealtimes Movement - It Works!



8 – 9 exposures to less liked vegetables increases liking for those vegetables.



Serving a variety of fruits and vegetables to preschoolers increases intake.



Moving fruit from a stainless steel tray to a colorful fruit bowl can double sales.



Giving healthy food choices fun, descriptive names – for example, calling corn “Pirate’s Pick Golden Corn” – can increase consumption by over **30%**.



When staff sit at the table with children and eat the same meal, children select and eat more vegetables.



Fruit selection can nearly **double** when a sticker of a popular character is offered with the fruit choice.



“{Children in child-care settings} were nearly three times as likely to select healthy food (carrots) that had a sticker or logo on it, and they were 35% more likely to take the first food in the serving line.”

**Smarter Kids Cafe:**

*Testing Smarter Lunchroom Scorecard Techniques for Childcare  
Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, 2016*



## Visit [SmarterLunchrooms.org](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org) to Get Started!



**Smarter Mealtimes Movement** *National Office*

The Cornell Center for  
Behavioral Economics in  
Child Nutrition Programs

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# The Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard

The Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard contains 20 simple, no-cost or low-cost strategies that child care programs can use to improve consumption of healthy foods and reduce waste. The strategies are based on research from the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (B.E.N. Center) and partners. Completing the scorecard can help child care providers identify which strategies are being implemented and which areas of the mealtime environment can be improved.

There are three parts to the Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard:

## **The Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard:**

The nation's premier tool to assess the use of evidence-based strategies for promoting healthy food choices in child care mealtime environments

## **Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard Summary:**

Works with the Scorecard to provide a quick snapshot of the results and next steps

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

about the Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard: Review this before you complete your first scorecard



# Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard



Date \_\_\_\_\_ Site Name \_\_\_\_\_ Completed by \_\_\_\_\_

The Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard is a list of simple, inexpensive strategies to promote healthy eating in half- or full-day programs that serve young children. These strategies work in childcare centers, Head Start programs, and family homecare settings.

## Instructions

1. Review the scorecard.
2. Observe meal and snack times throughout a single day. Check off statements that are completely true on the observed day. (Check with caregivers about daily routines.)
3. Add up the Scorecard total to determine your award level.
4. Go to [SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes) for information, tips, recipes, links to signs and labels, and other helpful advice for implementing the strategies.
5. Choose 2-3 unchecked strategies to incorporate into your daily routine. Use the Smarter Mealtimes Challenge worksheet to track your progress.
6. Once the new strategies are part of the daily routine, excellent! Keep it up! Fill out a new Scorecard and repeat this process at least once per year.

For more information visit:

[SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes)

- During at least one meal per day, children are given a choice between at least two types of fruit. Fruits can be fresh, frozen, canned, or dried.\*
- During at least one meal per day, children are given a choice between at least two types of vegetable. Vegetables can be fresh, frozen, canned, or dried.\*
- Sliced or cut fruit is offered.
- Fruit is offered in attractive bowls or baskets.
- Fruits and vegetables are offered first and at least one additional time during each meal.
- Fruits are called or labeled with fun, creative names.
- Vegetables are called or labeled with fun, creative names.
- Fresh, cut vegetables are frequently paired with a healthy dip.
- The main dish (or featured entree) is called or labeled with a fun, creative name.
- Taste tests of fruits, vegetables, and main dishes are provided at least once per year.
- Children are given opportunities to learn about food and gardening (planting a garden, seed planting, farm tours, nutrition education, etc.) at least once per year.
- Popular characters (such as Elmo) are used to promote healthy foods using labels or stickers.
- Meals are offered family style.
- Caregivers model healthy eating habits such as sitting with children during meals and eating the provided foods.
- Caregivers announce the menu as part of the daily routine.
- Attractive, healthful food signage (posters, stickers, or clings) is displayed in the child care environment.
- A weekly or monthly menu is provided to all families.
- Children are encouraged to help with the mealtime set-up and clean-up routine.
- All lights in the eating area work and are turned on during meals.
- To help decide what foods are offered, children and families are asked to provide feedback.



Scorecard Total \_\_\_\_\_



\*The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides serving size guidance for meals and snacks.



**Smarter Mealtimes Movement** *National Office*

## Award Level

**Bronze 6-10**

**Silver 11-15**

**Gold 16-20**



# Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard Summary

Date \_\_\_\_\_ School Name \_\_\_\_\_ Completed by \_\_\_\_\_

## First Impressions

When I walk into the mealtime space, the first thing I notice is....



## Strengths

This child care mealtime environment is doing a really good job at....



## Opportunities

Pick 2-3 unchecked strategies to incorporate into your daily routine. Use the *Smarter Mealtimes Challenge* worksheet to track your progress.



## Next Steps



**Smarter Mealtimes  
Scorecard Total** \_\_\_\_\_

of 20

## Award Level

Bronze 6-10

Silver 11-15

Gold 16 - 20



**Smarter Mealtimes  
Movement** *National Office*

The Cornell Center for  
Behavioral Economics in  
Child Nutrition Programs



# Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard FAQs

## Why Should I Use the Scorecard?

It offers research-based strategies that can reduce food waste and increase consumption of healthy foods. It provides a snapshot of how many strategies are currently in place in a child care program and which ones the child care program can work toward. The Scorecard can be filled out repeatedly to measure improvement over time.

## Who Should Complete the Scorecard?

The Scorecard is a valuable tool for child care providers to use in their own mealtime environment. Child care providers are encouraged to welcome stakeholders such as parents, administrators, and outside professionals to complete a Scorecard to give diverse perspectives. Always ask permission before completing a Scorecard in a child care mealtime space that is not your own and always provide results and supportive feedback to the mealtime staff afterwards.

## How Can I Make the Scorecard Work for my Child Care Program?

Each child care program is unique and may not be able to implement all the items on the Scorecard – *that's OK!* Mark off items that currently reflect the mealtime environment and use the Scorecard as a list of items to consider in the future.

## What if a Strategy is Only Half-True for a Child Care Program?

Only mark an item if it is *completely* true for the mealtime environment being observed. Consider partially true strategies to be prime candidates to implement first!

## I Work in a Child Care Program that Feeds Multiple Groups of Children in Different Meal Service Areas. Should I Complete the Scorecard in Each Mealtime Environment?

Yes, child care programs that have multiple mealtime locations or different groups of kids (i.e. mealtime in each classroom or different parts of the building) should complete a different scorecard for each mealtime location in the program.





## The Smarter Mealtimes Strategies

# The 20 Strategies of the Smarter Mealtimes Scorecard

**During at least one meal per day, children are given a choice between at least two types of fruit. Fruits can be fresh, frozen, canned, or dried.**

Fruits come in a wide variety of appealing flavors, textures, and colors. Offer a variety of fruits so children become familiar with different options over time. Fresh, frozen, dried, and canned all count! Consider seasonal, local, and preserved options to make storage easy and costs affordable.

At least once per day, offer at least two fruits at the same meal so that children are able to choose one or both options. The act of choosing empowers children to monitor and direct their own food choices, which leads to positive feelings (affirmations) about healthy foods and long-term healthy habits.

✖ *Photo Examples, Seasonal Produce Guide*

**During at least one meal per day, children are given a choice between at least two types of vegetables. Vegetables can be fresh, frozen, canned, or dried.**

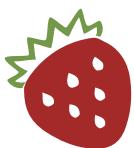
Like fruits, vegetables come in many attractive flavors, textures, and colors. As above, variety familiarizes children with diverse foods and expands their palates. Offering multiple veggie options at a meal lets children exercise choice and creates positive feelings about vegetables and mealtime. Fresh and preserved vegetables all count! Seasonal purchasing can simplify storage and lower costs.

✖ *Photo Examples, Seasonal Produce Guide*

**Sliced or cut fruit is offered.**

Children are more likely to eat fruit that is convenient and easy to eat. Having little hands, little mouths, and new teeth can make the prospect of biting hard, handheld fruits intimidating or challenging for children. When caregivers slice the fruit, children eat up to two-thirds more!

✖ *Seasonal Produce Guide*



✖ **Helpful Tools Available Online: [SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes)**



# The Smarter Mealtimes Strategies

## Fruit is offered in attractive bowls or baskets.

Offering a beautiful variety of colorful fruit prompts children to take more. Place fruits in colorful bowls or baskets to make them look more appetizing and double the amount of fruit children take! Use bowls or baskets that contrast with the color of the fruits such as brightly colored ceramic or plastic mixing bowls. Mix different fruits together such as sliced apples with sliced oranges, strawberries with blueberries, or cut pineapple with cut melon to emphasize variety.

*Photo Examples*

## Fruits and vegetables are offered first and at least one additional time during each meal.

Offering foods twice increases the likelihood that children will see it, take it, and eat it.

## Fruits are called or labeled with fun, creative names.

Using a creative, descriptive name makes foods sound interesting and tasty. If it looks delicious and sounds delicious, it MUST BE delicious! Use names such as orange squeezers, juicy grapes, slurpy watermelon, sweet tropical pineapples, sweet sugar berries, monkey phones (bananas), and snappy apples! For added fun and interest, involve the children in creating or voting for their favorite food names and related art for the dining area.

*Creative, Fun, and Descriptive Names*

## Vegetables are called or labeled with fun, creative names.

Using a creative, descriptive name makes foods sound interesting and tasty. If it looks delicious and sounds delicious, it MUST BE delicious! Use names such as cool-as-a-cucumber slices, carrot crunchers, juicy cherry tomatoes, power peas, sweetie pie sweet potatoes, and dinosaur trees (broccoli)! For added fun and interest, involve the children in creating or voting for their favorite food names and related art for the dining area.

*Creative, Fun, and Descriptive Names*



**Helpful Tools Available Online: [SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes)**



# The Smarter Mealtimes Strategies

## Fresh, cut vegetables are frequently paired with a healthy dip.

Raw vegetables have many qualities that children like: they are easy to hold and eat, fun to dip, crunchy, cold, colorful, and sweet. Dips can increase children's interest in raw, cut vegetables and can offset some stronger flavors, such as bitterness in a cut pepper, which may be intimidating for young children. Serve the vegetables and dips together, along with a fun, catchy slogan such as "Dip in! Veggie crunchers with hummus!" or "Cucumber scoops love salsa!" Another fun idea: Put dip in the bottom of a small cup and stand up veggie sticks in it.

### Quick Dips to Whip Up!

## The main dish (or featured entrée) is called or labeled with a fun, creative name.

Using a creative, descriptive name makes foods sound interesting and tasty. If it looks delicious and sounds delicious, it MUST BE delicious! Use names such as Fish Sticks of the Sea, Kickin' Chicken, Easy Peasy Mac 'n Cheesy, Rainbow Pizza (with veggies), or Sesame Street Sesame Noodles. For added fun and interest, involve the children in creating or voting for their favorite food names and related art for the dining area.

### Creative, Fun, and Descriptive Names

## Taste tests of fruits, vegetables, and main dishes are provided at least once a year.

Taste testing encourages kids to learn the smell, texture, and flavor of new foods in a fun, low-pressure way, without generating a lot of food waste. Kids need to be exposed to a new food several times before deciding if they like it. Use a smile chart, sticker chart, thumbs up/down signal, or ring-the-bell system to let kids express if they "Love it!", "Like it!", or "It's Not My Favorite." You can also let them also vote on their favorite (to focus on positive feedback).

### Nutrition Education Materials for Preschoolers



## Helpful Tools Available Online: [SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes)



## The Smarter Mealtimes Strategies

**Children are given opportunities to learn about food and gardening (planting a garden, seed planting, farm tours, nutrition education, etc.) at least once per year.**

Help children understand and engage with foods by learning about, growing, and eating their own food! When kids grow vegetables, they're more likely to eat them! The gold standard is to have a children's garden where kids can plant, weed, water and taste their own foods (vegetables are easiest), but there are alternatives for settings where having a garden isn't an option. Some schools have small table-sized greenhouses or planters. Planting beans in soil in plastic cups by the window also gives a hands-on experience! Water-based hydroponic gardens can be grown indoors year-round. Trips to a local farm or sharing books about gardening and farming can take the place of hands-on growing.

Additionally, when children learn how to make healthy choices and understand the positive outcomes of healthy eating, they will be better prepared to make healthy choices. Nutrition education can be incorporated into almost any setting. Talk about the importance of eating healthy foods and physical activity during meals and playtime. Newsletters, bulletin boards, and gardening all count as nutrition education.

*Nutrition Education Materials for Preschoolers*

**Children are encouraged to help with the mealtime set-up and clean-up routine.**

Involving children in the care of their learning and eating environment lets them develop responsibility, citizenship, fine motor skills, and respect for mealtime.

**Menus are offered family-style.**

Sharing food family-style helps children practice making decisions about foods (what they want to eat and how much) while practicing positive social interactions and developing positive feelings about eating together.

*Family-Style Meals Resources*

**Helpful Tools Available Online: [SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes)**





# The Smarter Mealtimes Strategies

## Caregivers model healthy eating habits such as sitting with children during meals and eating the provided foods.

Caregivers are role models! When caregivers share meals with children, they demonstrate the importance of mealtimes and of making healthy food choices. They also model appropriate mealtime behavior. Their participation adds prestige to the meal, the foods, and the practice of eating together.

*Posters for Providers*

## Caregivers announce the menu as part of the daily routine.

Knowing ahead of time which foods will be served at each meal gives children time to process this information, ask questions about the foods, and develop interest in the foods. This can encourage them to try new foods and empower them to make informed decisions about their food choices.

*Posters for Providers*

## Attractive, healthful food signage (posters, stickers, or clings) is displayed in the child care environment.

Colorful, exciting images of healthy foods familiarize children with the foods and help the children develop interest in eating them. Place the posters, stickers, or clings in areas where the children will see them regularly. Images should be clearly visible from 5+ feet away. Remember to hunker down to check the sightline—what is visible over a counter to an adult may not be visible to a 4-year-old! Similarly, low wall and window space, such as on lower cabinets or a refrigerator, is a great location for signage for little kids. Choose colorful, neat images of a variety of healthy foods. This is also a great opportunity to involve children in creating healthy signage for the room!

Note: Signage does not have to be permanent, especially in homecare settings. A colorful table cloth made of veggie-themed fabric, placemats featuring the food groups, or removable window and wall clings are all easy options for multi-purpose spaces. Free or inexpensive signs are available online through federal and nonprofit organizations.

*ABC's with Fruits and Veggies - Posters and Clings, Team Nutrition Resources*



**Helpful Tools Available Online: [SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes)**



# The Smarter Mealtimes Strategies

## **Popular characters (such as Elmo) are used to promote healthy foods using labels or stickers.**

Children are more likely to eat foods associated with characters they like (which is why so many characters are used in product placement!). Give healthy foods a fun “testimonial” by linking them with children’s favorite positive on-screen role models. Fun fact: The USDA has permission to use Sesame Street characters to promote healthy eating!

### *Photo Examples*

## **A weekly or monthly menu is provided to all families.**

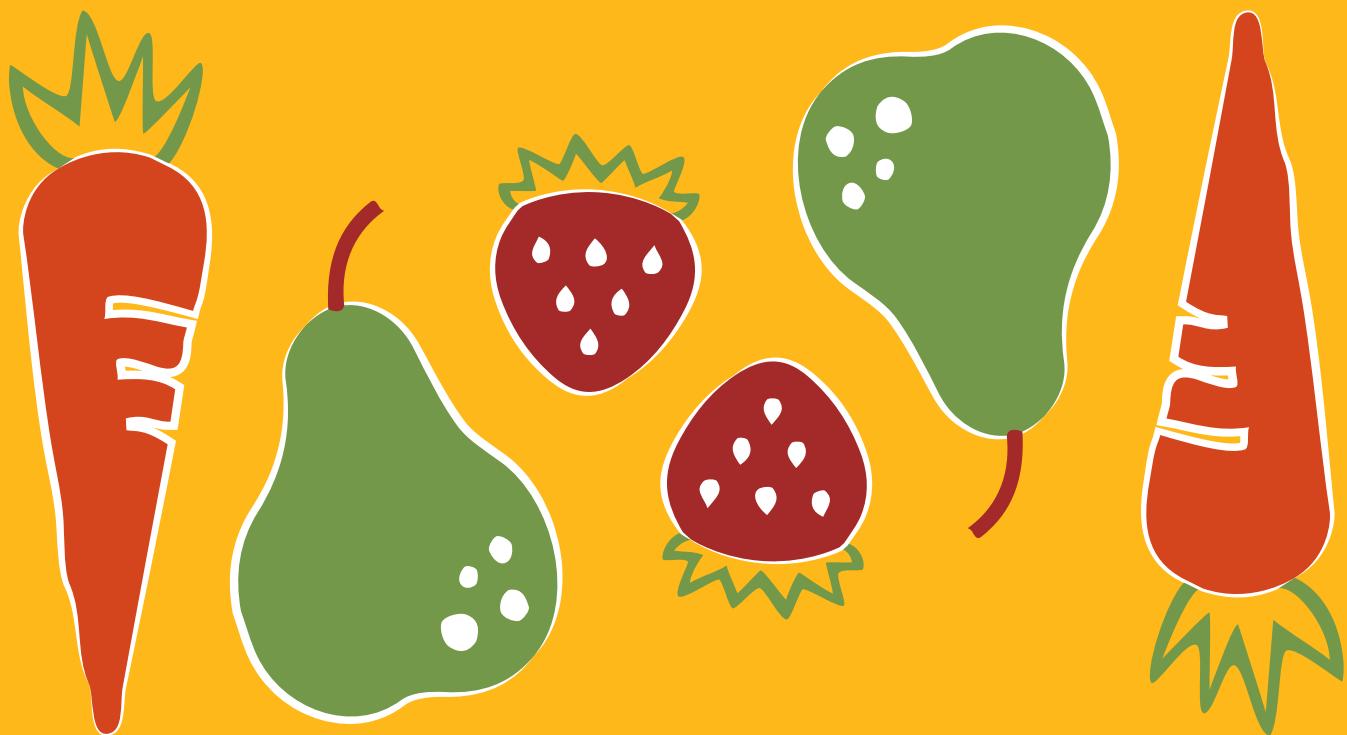
Informed parents can talk to their children about upcoming meals and the importance of healthy nutrition. Share a neat, up-to-date menu in multiple formats. Post the menu in the childcare space, send a printed copy home, and/or post online. Make life easy: place a stack of printed menus for parents to take on their way out the door.

## **To help decide what foods are offered, children and families are asked to provide feedback.**

You won’t know until you ask! Genuine feedback is very helpful in figuring out what foods children like, are familiar with, or would be open to trying in the future. You can save time and money by finding out ahead of time if students prefer Lo Mein over Chicken Pot Pie. Keep it low-pressure by letting kids vote or express their opinion in other fun ways, such as by drawing or writing a cheer about their favorite food option. Invite parents to chime in also, either through a take-home questionnaire or with an in-person menu planning meeting. Bring samples of potential new foods for the kids and parents to try, when possible (or photos, if actual sample foods are not an option).



 **Helpful Tools Available Online: [SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org/Smarter-Mealtimes)**



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