

# *Making Mealtimes Meaningful*

James Freeman

*We gather around the table  
In the rhythm of restoration  
Sharing in this moment  
Of presence and provision*

It was a sunny, early morning as the sounds drifted down the hallway from the kitchen to the bedroom. I could distinguish the voices of my parents and grandparents. The smell of applewood smoked bacon in the frying pan and a warm fire in the fireplace filled the house. I could hear the clanging of dishes as breakfast was being prepared. I was around ten years old and waking to the beginning of a day visiting my grandparents.

The rhythm and routines of life – as chaotic or calm as they can be – string together to form the day to day experiences for a child. For me, in this memory, it was a moment of feeling cared for, that I belonged, and that there were no other pressures in the world other than waking up and embracing any adventures the day had in store. The sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the experience all contributed to making a lasting memory.

Not every child gets to experience these kinds of moments. Too often for kids in care, days are filled with worry about where the next meal may come from, if there will be a safe place to sleep for the night, and if anyone – family or otherwise – even cares about them. So, the role of the adult in the care setting is to shape the environment and experiences into ones that are positive and restorative. This is the purpose of the entire setting in which we interact:

*I learned that the milieu was a place where everything we did for youth served a developmental and therapeutic purpose and was interconnected into the macro and micro systems in which we worked. If we planned our interactions and activities with this in*

*mind there was tremendous potential in each daily living experience. Nothing was too small to consider; each interaction and activity had enormous potential* (Krueger, 2010, p. 123-124).

Active in the shared space and place, we connect and engage with others in ways that support healing, restoration, and hope. It is in these experiences that we discover opportunities to demonstrate caring through our actions.

When planned and used thoughtfully, mealtimes can provide a natural rhythm within our daily lives. All around the world people pause and gather multiple times a day to sit and dine together. Family, cultures, timetables, food choices, preferences, and practices vary widely but we all eat and drink to live. Mealtimes and the food served is so integral to daily life that it is “impossible to create a good living environment if children and young people do not enjoy their food” (Kahan, 1994, p. 83). Without thoughtful meal planning and execution, we risk leaving kids to struggle with feelings of survival and miss opportunities to demonstrate caring.

Mealtimes are regular intervals in everyday life for every child and are occasions for developmental, growth-supporting engagement. In particular, mealtimes provide the opportunity to communicate to a child that they are cared for, matter, and belong.

### **I’m Cared For**

At dinner time, as the group is getting ready to sit at the table, Mari, one of the youths, asks:

“What are we having this for?”

“I remembered how you said the other day that you missed fried chicken and mashed potatoes.”

“Not saying I don’t like it. Just didn’t know anyone was listening.”

After serving one another and everyone begins to eat she says out loud to no one specific:

“This reminds me of when I was little, and my aunt and uncle would come over for dinner on Saturdays.”

The way in which we choose to gather and share a meal can create an experience of feeling cared for among those involved. There is a deep “significance of food in human development and how trust and attachment are often rooted in feeding [and mealtimes are] a vital part of building trust and connections with youth who might have experienced little of either” (Krueger, 2010, p. 61). Sometimes this is created for the entire group, for example, through the process of having food provided, prepared with attention, and the shared experience among those present. It can also be intentionally focused on one individual, for example, when providing a personal favorite among the options served or attention to how one’s place setting or plate is presented. These small yet meaningful acts demonstrate caring and set the stage to build trust and stronger connections.

### **I Matter**

During a quiet moment in the morning, one of the adults in the house approaches one of the kids and gives an invitation:

“Jayden, would you mind coming to the grocery store with me today? We’ve got some things to pick up for meals this week.”

“What do you want me to come for?”

“Well, I’d really like your advice on what would be some good dishes to pick this week.”

There are many ways to connect and engage with one another surrounding mealtimes – and it begins far ahead of gathering at the table. There are opportunities in the planning, shopping, putting away of groceries, washing fresh foods, and in mealtime preparations. All of these are moments of potential to involve others in ways they can make a meaningful contribution.

Experiencing meals together is “a golden opportunity to further connections, skills and relationships for the present and future” (Krueger,

2010, p. 62), especially when we are present and listen to one another to learn the likes and dislikes we each have and to understand the memories and dreams that are shared over mealtime conversations. In this process the embedded messages we can communicate are: We need you. We can't do this as well without you. You are important. You make a difference. You matter.

### **I Belong**

It's lunch time and everyone seems hungry and ready to dive in. One of the adults notice Sanjana isn't yet back from her appointment. She wonders if she should hold off the meal until she returns but is worried about the others getting anxious.

"I'm starved," says one of the girls.

"When we gonna eat?" shouts another.

The worker feels an urge to start the meal and have everyone eat to avoid any escalating conflict. Yet, she pauses to see what will happen.

"We can't eat yet," another youth interjects. "Sanjana ain't even back yet. We don't dish it up till we're all here."

The group sits quietly, engaged in their individual reading and drawing. A few minutes later, Sanjana pulls up in front of the house and two girls run out to greet her.

Those sharing a meal together can feel they belong here with the group, in the present moment of sharing together. Meals are an "important place for children to learn about behaviour, to acquire skills, and to feel connected to one another and their carers" (Smith, Fulcher & Doran, 2013, p. 47). This feeling of connection is communicated in the way the group is called together, the process used to share and distribute servings, and in the tone and topic of the conversation as it all occurs.

We can experience belonging through what is shared from our diverse family and ethnic cultures and past childhood experiences. Including individual favorites as well as cultural foods that expand our palates and experiences can promote an appreciation of culture in a tangible way.

Being intentional about these things at mealtimes opens the possibility to enhance feelings of cultural safety and celebrate the unique backgrounds and origins of those in the group.

### **Influence of Our Contemporary Context**

In the timeline of editing this book, the spread of COVID-19 around the globe has added an external element of context to the day to day lives of kids around the world. It's not the purpose of this chapter to elaborate on the impact of the pandemic on childhood but simply to acknowledge the context in which young people find themselves with increased time at home and isolation from friends, school, and extended family that provide critical developmental support and experiences.

It has been a context of loss of exposure to everyday childhood experiences (e.g., visiting friends, playing together outdoors, riding the bus or walking to school). School has been remote, there is less travel outside the home, and fewer visitors (if any at all) to engage with in our homes. This is all in addition to the increased stress, anxiety, and fear many young people are experiencing due to climate changes, racial tensions, and political polarization of nations and communities.

Days have, for many, blended together in a blur of passing time. Through this, morning, mid-day, and evening meal routines have become one of the few markers of time passing in day to day life. If we choose to be present and intentional in this opportunity, we can communicate to the kids we know and love that they are cared for, matter, and belong even in the midst of loss and collective trauma of the pandemic. And, more generally, this is what can aim for in the context of the struggle and difficulty in life many kids face beyond COVID-19.

There is, perhaps, no greater element in creating rhythms of restoration in daily life than mealtime routines. Our traditions vary across cultures, care settings, and personal experiences and there is a powerful potential in our actions around the planning and sharing of meals with those we live with and care for. The mealtime moments we shape can greatly impact their development and experiences in life.

## Reflection Questions and Activities

1. What have been your mealtime experiences growing up? How do those influence the way you shape and create experiences around food for others?
2. Find a documentary or show to watch together that celebrates the diversity of traditions, cultural influences, and tastes of food (such as Taste the Nation, Chef's Table BBQ or Taco Chronicles). Talk about what you notice in the lives and experiences of those who share their story.
3. Evaluate the process of serving meals in your house. Are opportunities to communicate caring, mattering, and belonging used intentionally? Do people learn about how to live and be together and to better appreciate their world through the way meals are experienced? What changes might you make to create more of these opportunities?

## References

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