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An Innovative, Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Promoting Child Health: The Reggio Emilia Approach and the Ecological Approach to Family Style Dining Program

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Abstract

The Reggio Emilia approach is an international example of high-quality early care and education programs and this article offers innovative, practical strategies in which Reggio Emilia-inspired educators can link this approach while implementing the research-based EAT Family Style Dining program to foster a positive meal-time environment and promote better health for children.

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The Reggio Emilia approach has become an international beacon for high-quality early care and education programs.

Educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy, are steeped in rich traditions that respect children and families and view children's development from a holistic context. The Reggio approach is informed by several key foundations that have contributed to its longevity and strong reputation worldwide, including (1) rights of the child, (2) teacher as researcher, (3) environment as third teacher, and (4) community as a key player. Although educators have been practicing the Reggio approach for more than 50 years, it is still considered innovative in many respects because of its distinctiveness from the traditional education systems in general use. Whereas traditional education curriculum adheres to predetermined guidelines and standards across a district or country, the Reggio approach emphasizes flexible, open-ended planning, and the understanding that children's rights are key to learning.

Programs inspired by the Reggio approach take an interdisciplinary perspective to child development, through partnerships with policymakers, psychologists, artists, cooks, gardeners, architects, and business owners to address the needs of children.¹ Because of its interdisciplinary nature, the Reggio approach pertains not only to academic



Figure 1. EAT Family Style Dining (<http://childpd.unl.edu/index.php?menu=EAT>).

learning but to every aspect of development, including children's health. This article explores how the Reggio approach is consistent with the research-based mealtime practices included in the Ecological Approach to (EAT) Family Style Dining program.²

The EAT Family Style Dining program presents childcare providers with the knowledge and skills needed for promoting children's development of healthy eating behaviors while engaging families and communities. Children and adults eat together during mealtime and children serve themselves and select their own portions. This practice is recommended by the National Academy of Medicine, USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Head Start. The EAT Family Style Program, developed by an interdisciplinary team of nutrition and early childhood researchers, is composed of seven different lessons that address specific strategies for promoting family style dining (see Figure 1).

Child's Rights in Reggio Approach and the EAT Family Style Dining Program

The Reggio emphasis on *child's rights* is also evident throughout the EAT Family Style Dining program, which encourages children and teachers to become equal participants during mealtime. Children are co-participants in the entire process; they observe and help in food preparation and are responsible for setting the table and serving the food. Children and teachers sit together at the table, and conversation is encouraged throughout the meal. At the conclusion of the meal, children scrape and return their dishes to the cart or kitchen. Each EAT Family Style Dining program includes research-based strategies that promote children's rights during mealtime.

- *EAT Family Style Lesson 1. Supporting Children's Self-Regulation.*

The rights of children are at the forefront of the EAT Family Style Dining program as we encourage children take ownership of their mealtime. The children decide what they eat and how much of it they consume. This strategy supports children's natural ability to self-regulate their food intake according to internal cues of hunger and fullness. Educators can support children's self-regulation by (1) teaching the appropriate vocabulary to express their internal feelings of hunger and fullness, (2) cueing them about their feelings of hunger and fullness (e.g. "If you are hungry, you can have more"), and (3) respecting these feelings once expressed (e.g. "You don't have to eat everything on your plate if you feel full").

- *EAT Family Style Lesson 2. Peer Modeling.*

Children serve as peer models as they try and enjoy eating the foods, discuss why certain foods are their favorites (e.g., "I like lettuce because it is crunchy"), and encourage their peers to try certain foods. Research has shown that children are more likely to try new foods when their peers encourage them to do so.³ Teachers also have opportunities to acknowledge children as they try new foods and offer the food to another child who might be more hesitant to try the food (e.g., "Bella likes lettuce because it is crunchy. Max, would you also like to try it?"). Children may politely refuse a food, which is entirely

acceptable. Acceptance of one another's freely expressed likes or dislikes models peer acceptance and an understanding that people have different preferences.

- *EAT Family Style Lesson 3. Sensory Exploration.*

At the very core of the Reggio approach is the concept that all children are natural scientists, driven by curiosity, and have strong observational skills that enable their process of learning. The EAT Family Style program puts this concept into action by engaging children in food-based sensory exploration. Reggio Emilia *provocations* are invitations for children to investigate and explore, and, in turn, provide children, individually or in a group, with opportunities to ask their own questions and problem solve. Educators can set up provocations throughout the classroom to stimulate understanding of new foods through explorations of food properties, including color, sound, smell, texture, and taste. Teachers also can engage children in this food-based sensory exploration during mealtime (e.g., "This celery is firm and crunchy. What else is like that? I think this apple is firm and crunchy, too.") and play (e.g., taste testing activities, gardening). By engaging children actively in these explorations, teachers allow children an active role in their learning and opportunities to form and share their own thoughts about food and other objects in their environment.

- *EAT Family Style Lesson 4. Children Serve Themselves.*

In a Reggio-inspired classroom, children are encouraged to interact in unique and meaningful ways with different materials. In EAT Family Style, teachers provide children with tools and opportunities to explore and interact with a variety of foods. For example, an educator might help children fill different-sized cups and containers using tablespoons and serving utensils during play. Children are then able to work on eye-hand coordination and motor development, which will be useful during mealtime as they serve themselves. Teachers can support self-serving by providing physical assists, such as using the hand-over-hand method to help children when scooping or pouring different foods. They can also use verbal assists, such as, "Hold the bowl with both hands" or "You can start with one scoop; if you are hungry, you can have more."



The Teacher's Role in the Reggio Approach and in the EAT Family Style Dining Program

As the Reggio Emilia approach supports a "child-centered" classroom, the teacher acts as a collaborator and children use the teacher's cues to shape the flow of the classroom. Teachers provide provocations to drive children's curiosity and give children grounding for their exploration and pursuit of knowledge about different topics. Teachers are encouraged to be cognizant of children's cultural and environmental differences. With cultural competence, teachers can bridge the gap between foods the child encounters at home and the foods they eat at school (e.g., if a family is from the southern part of the United States and likes okra, a common produce in that particular region, the classroom could grow and explore okra and then serve it at lunchtime). Below, we describe the three EAT Family Style lessons and mealtime practices that center on the teacher's role.

- *EAT Family Style Lesson 5. Role Modeling.*

Educators should take advantage of children's tendency to mimic adults as they model healthy eating practices. Teachers can role model healthy eating by describing food positively in a way that encourages children to try new foods. For example, instead of using food in a controlling manner (e.g., "Come on, be brave, try some broccoli"), the teacher can try the broccoli and say, "This broccoli is so crunchy and fresh. Would you like to try some?" It is also important for teachers to describe their own feelings of hunger and fullness. For example, pushing the plate away and saying, "I am feeling full so I will stop eating now," models the ability to listen to bodily cues of hunger and fullness to support self-regulation.

- *EAT Family Style Lesson 6. Rewards and Praise.*

Children need to be intrinsically motivated to try new foods. We may think that using rewards to motivate children to try new foods is effective, but research shows that it does not increase children's enjoyment of foods. To increase intrinsic motivation to try new foods, teachers can invite children to take a more central role during mealtime, such as setting the table, serving themselves, or cleaning up. These activities provide opportunities to engage with foods in meaningful ways, which can lead to more interest in trying new foods. When children do try new foods during mealtime, educators should also offer specific and relevant praise that highlights the child's behavior. Whereas it is important for teachers to give children specific praise about trying new foods (e.g., "Good job for trying green beans today!" instead of just saying "Good job!"), they should avoid praising children for foods they eat on a regular basis. Using experiences as a reward (e.g. verbal praise, hug, reading a favorite book) have also been found to be more effective than food-based rewards (e.g., "If you eat all your salad, you can have a cupcake later.").

- *EAT Family Style Lesson 7. Engaging Families and Communities.*

Reggio-inspired teachers serve as a link between the classroom and other key players in child development, such as families and the

community. Teachers can serve advocates for family style dining, collaborating with families and community partners. Parents can be invited to observe family style meals in the classroom and then engage in a follow-up discussion about the benefits and barriers of family style meals and efforts to support children's nutrition. Inviting farmers or master gardeners into the classroom to show vegetables they have grown can evolve into a season-long investigation about growing vegetables with the farmer as a consultant, harvesting vegetables in tandem with the farmer, and using the vegetables as produce for a healthy meal.

The Reggio approach includes documentation that can enable teachers, children, and families to reflect on learning. Using the Reggio approach of storytelling as a way to provoke thought, dialogue, and collaboration, teachers can tell a rich story about how children are learning during family style meals that can stimulate parents and other community partners to evaluate their own practices and engage in conversation about family style meals. Likewise, families can bring their own expertise and ideas to the conversation. As parents and community members advocate for family style dining within their circles of influence, the work of early childhood professionals and nutritionists is shared with many different fields.

The Importance of the Environment

The Reggio approach considers the environment to be the children's third teacher. An important aspect of encouraging children to partake in family style dining is the positive aesthetics and overall atmosphere of the experience. Children need to have positive mealtime experiences in order to be fully present and actively participate in learning. For example, teachers can encourage children to help make the mealtime atmosphere both unique and appealing by providing child-sized tables and chairs, bowls, and silverware and by decorating the space with plants, posters, and pictures of different foods. They can also post pictures of children trying different foods, documenting the children's progress. Children can be involved in the visual aspect of the classroom (e.g., by setting the table), which acknowledges the vital role they play in ensuring that mealtimes are a pleasant experience.

Conclusion

The EAT Family Style Dining program is congruent with the Reggio Emilia approach and draws upon research regarding best practices for encouraging children's healthy eating habits in child care settings. EAT Family Style focuses on the rights of the child, teachers as co-participants in the mealtime process, and the principle that the whole environment can support development of healthy eating habits. The EAT Family Style program promotes children's healthful development beyond nutrition and into areas such as socialization, exploration, vocabulary, motor skills, math, self-regulation, and cognitive development. When our attitude on mealtime focuses on creating a pleasant social and learning experience, educators, children, and families alike benefit.

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Notes

- 1 Edwards, C. P., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experience in transformation* (3rd ed.). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- 2 Dev, D. A. (2018). *Ecological approach to family style dining: Professional development program for child care providers*. Retrieved from <http://childpd.unl.edu/index.php?menu=EAT>
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Innovations With Nutrition

Results for Development (R4D), a global nonprofit development organization, supports the identification, adaptation, and scale up of cost-effective innovative solutions to the problem of malnutrition around the globe.

Over 45% of child deaths under age 5 globally can be attributed to malnutrition. Those who survive malnourishment in childhood face limited life opportunities, a higher chance of living in poverty, and higher risks of giving birth to malnourished children, thus perpetuating the cycle.

R4D is working to address this challenge by:

- Conducting a landscape analysis of the potential for diet innovations in the Indo-Pacific region to advise Innovation Xchange (iXc) at Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) on their next round of investments in nutrition and healthy diets
- Collaborating with Grand Challenges Canada to develop methods to model the potential impacts of innovations they fund. Decision-makers may use this approach in evaluating innovations, tracking progress, sharing results with wider audiences, and identifying key drivers of an innovation's impacts.
- Partnering with DFAT and USAID to fine-tune both the design and implementation of the LAUNCH Food accelerator program, a program that aims to source and support high-impact, innovative solutions that enable people to make healthy food choices.
- Working with the Local Development Research Institute (LDRI) to develop an agricultural input dashboard that will support decision-making to improve market efficiencies among stakeholders in Africa.

Read more at www.r4d.org/nutrition/nutrition-innovations/

Sustainable Development Goal 2

SDG Target 2.2



By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025 the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons