

The meaning of mealtime for children and “enjoying eating” in kindergartens and nursery centers

– Examination from fieldwork by a registered dietitian –

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### **Issue and purpose**

Since the Basic Act on Dietary Education (2005) was enacted, nursery centers, kindergartens, and centre for early childhood education and care have started to emphasize dietary education by requiring children to “enjoy their diet”. The Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education at Nursery Centers, Course of Study for Kindergarten, and National Curriculum for Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care contain descriptions aiming at “enjoying their diet.” Among laws and guidelines relating to the Basic Act on Dietary Education, the image of children “enjoying their diet” is described in detail in “Review Committee Report Concerning the Future of Sound Upbringing of Children through the Diet” (- i.e., in terms of “dietary education”-) (2004) and “Guidelines Concerning Dietary Education in Nursery Centers (2004). However, this preconceived image of children “enjoying their diet” is what adults expect them to do, which is a perspective that is different from whether or not children find it enjoyable.

Previous studies on children’s mealtimes in kindergartens and nursery centers conducted by using observations, interviews, and questionnaires offered insights concerning “enjoying the diet.” On the whole, it has been suggested that whether or not children enjoyed their diet was associated with dining together with other children and communicating with each other. Moreover, children view mealtimes as less enjoyable when warned by caregivers regarding picky and slow eating habits. Moreover, caregivers find it challenging to ensure that children perform multiple tasks, including “eating,” “enjoying,” and “learning” in parallel with others. Furthermore, caregivers’ needs are inclined to be in conflicts with children’s needs at mealtimes. Nevertheless, sufficient studies have not been conducted to identify the realistic picture of children “enjoying the diet” from the children’s perspective or the meaning of mealtime environment in kindergartens and nursery centers.

The purpose of this study was to clarify the meaning of mealtime environment in kindergartens and nursery centers from the children’s perspective by focusing on “enjoying the diet.” Fieldwork was conducted to identify the actual scene of children at mealtimes in kindergartens and nursery centers.

### **Method**

Fieldwork was conducted in a kindergarten and a nursery center. An image of mealtimes in each setting was taken with a video camera, while observational notes were made simultaneously, and an observational record was developed. Interviews were conducted with principals and teachers in charge to supplement these observations. Moreover, different documents, such as records on practicing dietary education, among others, were collected. The mealtime environment at home was observed in the case of one child whose parents agreed to cooperate in the study for comparison with the kindergarten.

## **Result and Discussion**

This research consisted of two types of studies. In the first study, “children who were perceived as having eating problems by principals and caregivers” were observed at mealtimes in a nursery center and a kindergarten. Results indicated that two children did not have a good appetite and seemed unhappy. They were repeatedly warned by the caregivers and urged to eat. They looked happy only when chatting with other children and getting praised by caregivers. A major difference was observed in one child at mealtimes at home in comparison to mealtimes at the kindergarten. At home, the child looked happy and ate the meal proactively on his/her own, and it did not take long to finish the meal. The child had a good conversation with parents on wide-ranging topics and was in an upbeat mood when conversing, and acted freely. Moreover, the parents hardly warned the child. After comparing with the mealtimes at home, it was assumed that children who were perceived as having eating problems in a nursery center and a kindergarten perceive the mealtime environment in a nursery center and a kindergarten as long and unpleasant experience. They had few conversations with caregivers, and their topics were limited. Moreover, they were surrounded by a less pleasant atmosphere for interacting with caregivers. Furthermore, the caregivers warned them from time to time, which restricted their freedom. The reason why caregivers warn and urge children to eat at mealtimes might be because of “school lunch time” (mealtime given school lunch time at a primary school) in consideration of the request of a primary school and their sense of responsibility to let children eat everything on the plate for nutritional intake. This was also seen as a burden for caregivers.

In the second study, “children who were perceived as not having an eating problem by principals and caregivers” were observed at mealtimes at a nursery center. The results indicated that their attention was mainly focused on friends around them. They seemed to be cheerful when having direct interactions with friends by conversing directly, reacting to the same thing together, and making each other laugh. Some of the children seemed to be enjoying having indirect interaction with others by observing friends and feeling the cheerful atmosphere around them. It was considered that those who were perceived as not having eating problems found joy at mealtimes at the nursery center by interacting with friends. The

caregivers interacted with children daily at the beginning of mealtime and towards the end of the mealtime, checking “the school lunch time”. Moreover, caregivers did not necessarily warn children who exceeded school lunch time and warned them only when they were not eating well. Moreover, the children themselves did not seem to be conscious of the school lunch time. Only some children paid attention when caregivers checked school lunch time. Meanwhile, many children did not show any interest in checking the time. It appeared that children gave priority to eating at their own pace. It is suggested that “Eating everything on the plate in the allocated school lunch time” required by nursery centers, restricts the mealtime environment. However, children do not merely follow the rules when faced with these restrictions, but rather prioritize eating at their own pace and having fun by interacting with friends to make mealtimes suit them. It is possibly that less strict regulations by caregivers could support those children to have joy of eating.

## **Conclusions**

Children perceive their mealtime environment at kindergartens and nursery centers as a part of their daily life in the kindergartens and the nursery centers. For the children, it is a place to spend time in a way that meets their interests. Concretely, the place is considered as carrying significance to children where they can eat their meals at their own pace and develop relationships with friends and caregivers, and have fun. How caregivers interact with children, for example, how to communicate with children and how much restrictions are imposed on children, was important for turning the meaning of mealtime for these children into reality, and for children to “enjoy eating”. It is deemed necessary for registered dietitians and nutritionists to understand what mealtimes mean to children and the way they interact with caregivers when they become engaged in mealtimes at kindergartens and nursery centers.