

Teacher-Child Interactions During Mealtimes

'SKIP Research Bites' is a series of short summaries based on findings from the Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project.

What does research tell us?

Research indicates that teacher-child interaction during routine activities, such as mealtimes, support young children's communication skills, participation, learning, and development (Kultti, 2014). Mealtimes provide an opportunity for varied teacher talk due to the unstructured nature of this activity and the availability of rich spoken language opportunities for the children. Based on prior studies (e.g., Cabell et al., 2013; Mita et al., 2015), benefits of teacher-child interactions during mealtimes include:

- **Socialisation between teachers and children, which helps to** strengthen relationships within the classroom, thus building bonds akin to a mini 'classroom family'.
- **Learning of new information** such as new words to name foods, nutritional habits and good manners, which in turn promote opportunities for developing an understanding of concepts and skills
- **Opportunities for adults to be positive role models** by sitting with children, providing verbal encouragement and modelling independent behaviour like getting ready for mealtimes, table manners or asking for more food.

Interactions during mealtimes can bring about positive outcomes, such as supporting young children's communication skills, participation, learning and development. Encouraging mealtime interactions may also bring about subsequent opportunities for quality interactions through shared and sustained conversations.

To Learn More:

- © Chien, N. C., et. al. (2010). Children's classroom engagement and school readiness gains in prekindergarten. *Child Development*, 81(5), 1534-1549.
- © Kultti, A. (2014). Mealtimes in Swedish preschools: Pedagogical opportunities for toddlers learning a new language. *Early Years*, 34(1), 18-31.
- © Mita, S. C., Gray, S. A., & Goodell, L. S. (2015). An explanatory framework of teachers' perceptions of a positive mealtime environment in a preschool setting. *Appetite*, 90, 37-44.
- © Pianta, R. C., La Paro, K., & Hamre, B. K. (2008). *Classroom Assessment Scoring System – CLASS*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

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What is this study about?

In this study, we wanted to know...

1. How do Singapore kindergarten teachers interact with children during mealtimes?
2. What are some positive aspects we observed from teacher-child interactions during mealtimes?

We video-recorded and observed three K1 classrooms during mealtimes. Using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (Pianta et al., 2008) we examined the Emotional Support, Classroom Organisation, and Instructional Support provided by teachers in their interactions with children.



What did we find?

Interactions between teachers and children during mealtimes can bring about numerous positive outcomes, such as opportunities for learning new words, introducing new concepts and promoting healthy lifestyles. Here are two examples from our observations:

Positive Outcomes	Examples of Interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting peer interaction • Learning new words (fruit names) 	<p>Teacher: What fruit is this? Hidhir : ...? Aiman: Dragon fruit. Teacher: Pome... granate. We call it pomegranate. Malay call 'delima'. Aiman: Teacher, dragon fruit. Teacher: What is it? Aiman: Dragon fruit. Teacher: Dragon fruit! No, no this not dragon fruit. This is pomegranate. Adnan: Teacher, later, when you eat dragon fruit you be dragon! Teacher: Who, say that. No, lah! Only the name. Hidhir: Yeah, only the name. Teacher: Ahh... like butterfly. Butter cannot fly, but the name is butterfly.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting healthy eating • Introducing new words (calcium) and concepts (benefits of drinking milk) 	<p>Harry: Last time, I try milk but it's too yucky. Teacher: But, it's good for you. Teacher: If you don't drink it, you cannot get any calcium in our body. Ron: And, and, you, you can't run. Teacher: Hmm, Sorry? Harry: ... Every day, if I try. Teacher: But, it's good for you. Teacher: If you don't drink it, how are your teeth and bones going to grow? You need milk so that your bones can grow.</p>

What does it mean for teaching and learning?

Teachers may face challenges when trying to interact with children during mealtimes due to limited time allocated for mealtimes, the use of mealtimes to discuss logistical issues with colleagues or to prepare classroom materials, etc. However, our examples illustrated that it is possible to have positive and productive conversations with children during mealtimes. By engaging with children during mealtimes, teachers provide more opportunities for children to interact socially, learn language skills and build a sense of responsibility, thus contributing to their learning and socio-emotional development.

The NEL Framework highlights the importance of quality interactions, where children engage with teachers in shared and sustained conversations. Positive interactions during mealtimes may bring about opportunities for such shared and sustained conversations to take place. To promote positive and quality teacher-child interactions during mealtimes, teachers may:

- Talk about food eaten during mealtimes, origins and shapes of food or children's favourite types of food.
- Encourage positive behaviour and responsibility, such as dining etiquette, exchanging greetings, saying please/thank you and cleaning up after themselves.
- Provide opportunities for children to freely express themselves in informal settings.
- Build on children's responses during conversations.
- Highlight the importance of healthy food and eating habits to children.

