

# How Important Is Menu Planning?

Good planning can make a huge difference!

The menu influences almost every aspect of the food service operation, from what foods are purchased and how they are prepared, to whether or not meals are popular with the children.

This section looks at the ABC's of successfully planning appealing meals. It also reviews the menu planning principles.

## Basic Menu Planning Principles

The basic menu planning principles listed below and discussed in the following pages are a good starting point. Keep them in mind as you think about your children's preferences and nutrition needs.

*The five basic menu planning principles are...*

1. Strive for balance.
2. Emphasize variety.
3. Add contrast.
4. Think about color.
5. Consider eye appeal.

### Menu Planning Principle # 1

#### Strive for balance

As you work to plan meals that are nourishing, appealing, and taste good, you will want to strive for balance in a number of ways. As you select and combine foods:

- **Balance flavors in appealing ways.**

Make sure individual foods, when served together, make a winning combination.

Too many mild flavors make a meal too bland.



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Too many strongly flavored foods make a meal unacceptable to children. For example, a lunch or supper menu with sausage pizza, Cajun potatoes, coleslaw, brownie, and milk has too many strong and spicy flavors

- **Balance higher fat foods with ones that have less fat.**

Avoid having too many higher fat foods in the same week. In other words, do not include sausage pizza in a week's menu if you are already planning to serve hot dogs and fried chicken.

Look for ways to use lowfat side dishes to balance a higher fat entrée. For example, with a grilled cheese sandwich, serve carrot and celery sticks.

## Menu Planning Principle # 2

### Emphasize variety.

Serving a variety of foods is important because no one food or group of foods can give us everything we need for a healthy diet. Variety also makes menus interesting and appealing. To add variety:

- **Include a wide variety of foods from day to day.** Avoid planning the same form of food on consecutive days, such as meatballs with spaghetti on Monday and homemade meat ravioli on Tuesday.
- **Vary the types of main courses you serve.** For example, serve casseroles one day, soup and sandwiches the next, or perhaps a main dish-salad.
- **Include different forms of foods, and prepare them in a variety of ways.** For instance, some vegetables are good eaten raw. If you usually serve a particular vegetable cooked, serve it uncooked if it is good that way. Or cook it but use a different recipe or seasoning. In any case, be sure the "different way" of serving is as appealing as the "usual way."
- **Include a surprise item or a small amount of a new or unfamiliar food periodically.** For example, try adding cauliflower, red cabbage, or spinach to a salad.

## Menu Planning Principle # 3

### Add contrast.

Strive for contrasts of texture, flavor, and methods of preparation.

- **Think about the texture of foods as well as their taste and appearance.** For added appeal, serve a green salad or raw vegetable with spaghetti. Serve a crisp fruit or vegetable with a burrito, and crisp steamed carrots and broccoli with meatloaf. Pair toasted garlic bread and cold broccoli salad with homemade cheese ravioli.
- **Avoid having too much of the same type of food in the same meal.** A lunch with too many starches or too many sweets lacks contrast as well as balance. So does a meal with too many heavy foods. If you are serving a hearty casserole, plan to serve a vegetable or fresh fruit.
- **Use a pleasing combination of different sizes and shapes of foods.** Within a meal, present foods in several different shapes, such as cubes, mounds, shredded bits, and strips. A meal with cubed meat, diced potatoes, mixed vegetables, and fruit cocktail needs more contrast in size and shape foods.

#### Menu Planning Principle # 4

##### **Think about color.**

Use combinations of colors that go together well, and strive for contrast and maximum color presentation. A good rule of thumb is to use at least two colorful foods in each menu for visual appeal.

- **Avoid using too many foods of the same color in the same meal.** A meal with turkey, rice, cauliflower, white bread, pears, and milk would lack color contrast. A better combination would be turkey and cranberry sauce, green peas, whole-wheat bread, orange slices, and milk.
- **Remember that vegetables and fruits are great for adding natural color to side dishes as well as entrées.** A slice of tomato really brightens up a potato salad. A fresh sliced grape or strawberry livens up a dish of diced pears or peaches.
- **Use colorful foods in combination with those that have little or no color.** Serve broccoli spears with whipped potatoes, for example. Add pimento or green pepper to corn. Serve a bright red apple and green lettuce with a hamburger, baked beans, and milk. Serve green peas, apricots with oven fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and milk.
- **And don't forget spices.** It's easy to sprinkle on a dash of cinnamon to canned fruit or a little paprika on vegetables and potatoes for added color.

## Menu Planning Principle # 5

### Consider eye appeal.

Your children's first impression will be how a meal looks. Make sure what you serve looks good as well as tastes good.

- **Think of the total presentation.** As you plan for color, consider the color of the dishes, plates, or trays to be used as well as the colors of the foods.
- **Plan the way you will place the menu items on the tray or plate.** Visualize how the food will look when served and decide on the most attractive arrangement.

## Family-Style Meal Service

Family-style meal service means serving foods in bowls or dishes on the table. Children are encouraged to serve themselves, or serve themselves with help from an adult.

Enough food must be placed on the table to provide the full required portion size for all the children at the table.

### Family-style meal service has some advantages...

- **Family-style meals allow children to identify and be introduced to new foods, new tastes, and new menus.** Children are often unsure about new foods. Seeing new foods and watching others serve themselves gets them interested. They are more willing to try a small serving when they see other children trying new foods.
- **Children can choose the amount of food they want to have on their plate.** When foods are served family-style, children may choose to take a small portion of food, knowing that the food will still be available if they would like a second serving. Children feel more in control to judge their hunger and fullness throughout the meal, knowing that more food is within easy reach.
- **Children practice good table manners and new skills with their hands and fingers.** Serving themselves gives children time to practice skills like passing, pouring, and scooping foods. Taking turns, sharing, and politely turning down foods are all part of the table manners children learn by participating in family-style meal service.

## Special Considerations

As you apply the basic menu planning principles, keep in mind any special considerations, such as:

- Regional food preferences
- Holidays and other special occasions
- Climate and seasons
- Product availability

Here are some menu planning tips...

- **Food preferences:** Consider the regional, cultural, and personal food preferences of the children you serve, but don't be afraid to introduce new foods from time to time. Include new foods and encourage children to try them.
- **Holidays and special occasions:** Plan festive meals and snacks for national holidays, center events, and special occasions like parents' visiting days. Don't forget National Nutrition Month in March!
- **Climate or seasons:** Include more hot foods in cold weather, and more cold foods in warm weather.
- **Product availability:** Use foods in season. Plan to serve plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables when they are plentiful, reasonably priced, and are at the peak of quality.

Additionally...

- Plan meals and snacks that can be prepared in the time available.
- Consider the amount of self-preparation required for each menu, such as vegetables to be cut up or items to be made from scratch.
- Balance the workload – food preparation and clean-up – from day to day and from week to week.

## Steps to Successful Menu Planning

In this section, we will look closely at the following steps:

- Schedule a time to plan menus. Collect menu resources.
- Think about changes you want to make.
- Select a timeframe.
- Select the main dish.
- Select the other menu item or items.
- Evaluate what you have planned.

### Menu Planning Step # 1

**Schedule a time to plan menus. Collect menu resources.**

- **Plan menus well in advance, preferably a month or more ahead of the time they are to be served. You will want to:**

Review previous menus and any other food service records that indicate the children's preferences.

Involve children, parents, and other interested parties in the planning.

Select and test food products and recipes.

- **To be prepared, you will want to pull together a variety of menu resources.** These might include, for example, past successful menus or recipe files. Check at your local library for additional resources.
- **For easy reference, have on hand copies of food production and inventory records.** Also have available publications such as USDA's Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs and Child Care Recipes: Food for Health and Fun.

### Menu Planning Step # 2

**Think about changes you want to make.**

- **Review your menus, the products you purchase, and preparation techniques.**
- **With the Dietary Guidelines and children's nutrition needs and preferences in mind, take another look at what you have been serving.**

Are you planning sufficient variety?

Do you need more servings of grains/breads?

Do you need more servings of whole grains?

Can you serve more vegetables/fruits?

How often do you serve lowfat entrées?

Do you need to serve some foods less often?

### Menu Planning Step # 3

Select a timeframe.

- **If you determine that *cycle menus* will work for your begin by selecting a timeframe for a cycle menu.**

The cycle menu is the master plan of meal planning. Cycle menus are menus planned for a period of time and repeated on a regular basis. A cycle menu is 4-5 weeks of menus.

- **What are the advantages of cycle menus?**

If carefully planned, cycle menus have a number of advantages. For example, they offer variety. They are flexible, allowing substitutions.

In addition, they can save time in repetitive functions such as gathering information, planning menus, selecting foods, developing specifications, costing, and arranging work schedules.

They can also:

Be adapted easily for varied ages.

Allow flexibility for such things as seasonal changes, holidays, and special events.

Allow more time for other tasks, such as training and nutrition education.

### Some Tips for Getting the Most Out of Cycle Menus

- Flexibility is the key! Review menus frequently to make adjustments for changes in availability of USDA foods, to take advantage of an especially good buy, or a seasonal occasion.
- So that holidays and special activities won't go unrecognized, be sure to note them on the calendar well in advance. Designate specific dates when a special menu is to be substituted for the one in the cycle.
- Plan one cycle for each season: Fall (September, October, November); Winter (December, January, February); Spring (March, April, May); and Summer (June, July, August).
- Keep a small inventory of substitute items to use in the event of an emergency.

#### Menu Planning Step # 4

##### Select the main dish.

- **Main dishes should be selected first in menu planning because they are the central focus of a meal. They form the framework around which you will plan the rest of the menu.**
- **Be careful when selecting main dishes:**

If you include a main dish that is not central to the meal or is not recognized by children as the main dish, this could result in poor acceptance.

Follow a plan for providing a variety of main dishes.

If you repeat the same main dish during a 2-week period, consider varying the other foods served with it.

Make sure processed products have a Manufacturers Specification Sheet.

#### Menu Planning Step # 5

##### Select the accompanying food item or items.

- **Include food items that complement the main dish.**
- **Plan to use plenty of vegetables, fruits, and grains.**

- Keep in mind that children like to eat many vegetables raw as well as cooked.
- Introduce new foods, starting with small amounts.

## Menu Planning Step # 6

### Evaluate what you have planned.

- Before you decide to wrap up a planning session, look over what you have planned.
- Looking at your menus, ask yourself questions like the following:

Do your meals comply with the USDA Food Guide Pyramid?

Do the meals provide children with adequate calories and nutrients while reducing fat, saturated fat, and sodium?

What kind of example do the meals set for the children? Are they consistent with the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines? Do they encourage children to eat a variety of foods?

Will the foods on the menu appeal to children and look appetizing?

Do you have sufficient help and equipment to prepare and serve the meal you have planned?

What about cost?

Do your menus repeat any of the foods you have selected for other meals on that day?