

Mealtime Environments

Creating the optimal mealtime environment is a necessary adaptation for successful routines for the infant or toddler with a visual impairment. Aspects of the mealtime setting, such as lighting, background noise, surface and utensil contrast, and positioning will be individualized for each child and their visual needs. As Teachers of Students with Visual Impairment in Early Intervention (TSVI-EIs), you know valuable information about how a child uses their vision functionally, and can support families in addressing the need for a quality environment at mealtime. This is a great way to review and apply the knowledge gained from the Functional Vision Assessment with families and to help them problem solve in the real-life setting of the family table!

Lighting

Most kitchens or dining areas are brightly lit from overhead lighting fixtures or windows nearby. Consider what the child's visual condition is and how they are able to manage light sources. If they have albinism or if visual glare is an issue, you may want to discuss the possibility of **dimming the light** in the eating area or using **lower power light bulbs**. Choosing a **shaded table lamp**, rather than the bright florescent fixture overhead, may focus the light source for the child on their food. Depending on the time of day, observe the amount of natural light coming in through **windows and adjust shades, curtains, or the highchair itself** accordingly. These strategies will allow the infant or toddler to feel more comfortable at the table and use their vision for scanning and identification, rather than squinting.

Background Noise

Every home and mealtime setting has some amount of background noise. It can include **environmental sounds**, like the microwave beeping or the pots and spoons clattering on the stove, or **mood-setting sounds**, like music or the news on the television. The infant or toddler with a visual impairment will need **additional communication** from family members as they learn about mealtimes, so choose background noise sources carefully. During mealtime preparation, families will want to **share environmental sounds through narration** and, during the meal, it is necessary that the child understands when individuals are talking to them and that they can **distinguish actual conversations at the table as opposed to artificial conversations on the television**. If the family must have music or the television on in the background, **keep the volume low** and allow the child to focus on what is happening at the table.

Surface and Utensil Contrast

Being familiar and comfortable with utensils and equipment at mealtime is a **critical first step toward independent use**. Increasing the **visual contrast** of plates, bowls, spoons, and cups **will make it easier** for the child to locate familiar or favorite items without "working hard" at using their vision instead of mealtime tasks (like scooping or drinking). Consider **food colors and surfaces** for contrast adaptations. Mashed potatoes will be easier to see on a tray, plate, or placemat with a dark color, while blueberries might stand out in a white bowl. **Brightly colored, child-sized spoons or cups** will be more likely to catch the child's eye as they move across the mealtime surface. **Limit patterned tablecloths and napkins** to provide a simple visual background at the table.

Positioning

In today's society, it is accepted that the **most common positioning** when teaching an infant or toddler about mealtime is for the child to be in a highchair or booster **facing the adult**. This position promotes caregiver and child eye-contact and helps the bonding process during the early days of introducing solids. If the child has a visual impairment, this may or may not be a beneficial situation. Most caregivers position themselves so it is easier for them to use their dominant hand when using a spoon to feed a child. Depending on the child's visual field, or visual awareness, it may be best for caregivers to **sit on the side with the most consistent or clearest vision**. In addition, during situations when children are learning specific tasks such as chewing, scooping, or drinking from a cup, it may be beneficial for the caregiver to **sit slightly behind the child** or **have the child on their lap** to feel the adult's arm or cheek movements to model the task. Families should be **flexible in positioning** when teaching mealtime skills so their children have **auditory and tactual cues** to learn from consistently.

Jenny is just home from work and ready to start cooking dinner. As she carries nine-month-old Riley in to the dining room next to the kitchen, she notices that the sun is lower in the sky and is shining directly on Riley's high chair. Knowing Riley has cataracts and will not be able to control the glare from the sun, she pulls the curtains closed and turns Riley's chair to face away from the window. She turns on some quiet music, but keeps it low so Riley can hear her voice and the sounds in the kitchen. She puts down several brightly colored spoons on the dark gray tray and is happy to see Riley reach for an orange one immediately. Jenny walks into the kitchen and narrates her simple tasks – "I'm warming the sauce in the microwave – ding! It's ready!" "I'm stirring the noodles, do you hear the metal pan," and "Daddy's home! I just heard the door close!" Riley responds to all of these communications with smiles and bangs her spoon on the tray. Her father comes in to the kitchen and sits down in front of Riley, kissing her hello and talking about her collection of spoons. Dinner is ready, and Jenny brings the meal to the table, telling Riley about each container as she sets it down. Jenny sits to Riley's right, and her father is on her left. They hold hands as they say a short dinnertime poem, and Jenny puts the white noodles on Riley's tray slightly to the right of midline (where her best vision is) and some green peas in a bright pink bowl in the center of the tray. Riley wants to try to scoop with the spoon so Jenny puts her arm under Riley's hand and helps move her hand in a scooping motion. Riley tries one of two times on her own with some success and then picks up each pea with her hand and eats it. Jenny and Riley's father include Riley in the conversation, calling her by name as they talk about their day.