

Executive project
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GROWING BIGGER AT LUNCHTIME

Growing in the way one is seated at the table. The littlest children use a high chair. They move on to a seat with a cushion. Then to a chair almost like a grownup's, but smaller.

Growing in the way one eats. The littlest children are fed with a spoon. Then they are partly fed and partly they use their hands to eat. Then partly fed and partly using a spoon of their own. Then by themselves, using their hands and a spoon. Then with a fork, but still helping sometimes with their hands. Finally using only a fork, and quite skilfully.

Growing in the way one talks. At the table there is communication. The littlest children emit vocal sounds, which the accompanying adult interprets. The children utter exclamations, which the adult echoes. The children utter a few words, for example to assert themselves ("Me first!"). The words evolve into real conversations with questions and answers; the exchange involves thinking ("Why is there a soup spoon?" "Why do you suppose?" "Put it away." "But what if there's soup? How would we eat it without a spoon?"...) Words facilitate thinking, which can be expressed out loud ("Tomorrow the crèche is closed," says Irene as she looks at her teacher..).

IN CONCLUSION

We have a millenary eating culture to preserve and transmit: a culture of what we eat and of how we eat it. Crèche lunchtime offers a privileged occasion for helping children to form a healthy and enjoying

attitude towards mealtimes. But to be effective, lunchtime must be organized with educational criteria. We must be aware of the complexity of this moment, and of its potential experiential value.

The film "Educational lunchtime" presents a selection of positive practices, in the intention of offering educators a possible reference model. In reality of course, crèches are all different, and it is not always possible to achieve an ideal lunchtime, at least not immediately. Compromises are inevitable (if we do not have chairs which permit the children to rest their feet on the floor, for the time being we shall have to use the chairs we have...). The important thing is work in the right direction.

Educational lunchtime in the crèches is a good example of civic living; it is functional, cooperative and pleasant. In a perspective of educational continuity, hopefully the crèche model can suggest ways to modify lunchtime in schools for older children, as well



GROWING AT LUNCHTIME

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(by Coordinamento Pedagogico Comunale 0-3)

A new DVD for a new educational path; a tool for teacher training and for spreading childhood culture, in collaboration between Fondazione Sistema Toscana and the Department of Education of the City of Florence (a collaboration which has already produced a film about heuristic play, "Exploring and discovering").

In this case the Pedagogical Coordination of Early Childhood Services of the City of Florence has chosen to use the same medium, a film. On the one hand the film presents the experience of teacher training about "Educational Lunch" under the guidance of Penny Ritscher, addressed to the staff of public crèches. On the other hand it benefits from international connections, which have developed recently. The result is this DVD, which shows the experience and knowledge shared between the Berlin Childcare Services – managed by KLAX gGmbH - and the Florentine Childcare Services, with the purpose of sharing and exchanging good educational practices. Taking into account our respective cultural and educational approaches, we have tried to show a

lunchtime specifically designed for young children. The DVD is produced in Italian, German and English in order to further its international use.

WHY LUNCHTIME?

In educational services, care is present at all times of the day. Care permeates the work of all the professionals involved in the crèche, each in their own specific way.

Lunchtime, in particular, is one of the most significant moments of child care. It involves relational, affective, cognitive and cultural values, in addition to nutritional education. In our contemporary Western world, characterized by abundant food (but not always of good quality) and by hurry, of food conceived as consumption, we notice an increasing need, especially in educational contexts, to give care and attention to how mealtimes are offered. Time, space, and relationships must be personalized, in order to promote experiences that further

each child toward independence, self-awareness and self-regulation.

Educational services receive each child together with his personal family experience. Crèches must offer children mealtimes as an organized and welcoming context for discovering and learning.

Considering the multicultural environment that increasingly characterizes our educational services, it is important to keep in mind that mealtimes can be a vehicle of cultural attitudes and habits.

Taste itself reflects a culture of belonging and contains a strong element of identity. Today we are increasingly subject to contamination and exchanges between cultures. It is crucial to overcome stereotypes. Moreover, we must remember that, regardless of cultural origin, every family is different from the other.

Italy has always acknowledged the important cultural value of food, giving it considerable space in education, from the experience of Maria Montessori up to the present. In a spirit of

inter-cultural encounter, we believe it is possible and necessary to reflect on the potential of lunchtime as a moment of well-being and learning.

RE-THINKING LUNCHTIME

(by Penny Ritscher)

PREMISE

Crèche lunchtime has a long institutional history. De Amicis, in his book "*Cuore*" (1886), described the situation this way:

"In long lines they entered the refectory, where there were two very long tables with many round holes; and in each hole a black bowl full of rice and beans, and next to it a tin soup-spoon. As they entered... many stopped in front of a bowl, thinking that was their place, and gulped down a spoonful, when a teacher came and said, "Move on!", and they moved forward three or four steps and gulped down another spoonful, and so forth until, after having scrounged half a bowl of soup, they reached their own place. At last, by dint of pushing and shouting, "Hurry on! Hurry on!", the teachers got everyone in order... Then they began to eat. What a sight! It was like a chicken coop..."

Family mealtime also has its history, and it is often a story of stress. Two authors remember it this way:

"When I was little, if I didn't eat everything that Mamma put on my plate, Daddy and I argued till I ran to my room in tears... Mama would have cooked me something else, but Daddy insisted that the leftovers stay there until I had eaten them ... Sometimes he continued to force them on me for days and days until I had eaten them all..." (A. Spiegelman, "*Maus*", 2004)

"I detested omelettes... and to tell the truth, sometimes I almost envied those starving children in India, whom no one ever forced to finish what was on their plate." (A. Oz, "*A Tale of Love and Darkness*", 2002).

Family mealtimes tend to suffer from hurry, anxiety, provocation and scolding. Permissive eating habits have replaced the authoritarian meals of the past: children are allowed to eat whatever and whenever they want. If the family eats in front of the television (a practice considered normal), the adults are distracted from their children. To get attention, the children may become capricious or refuse to eat. A common (but anti educational) practice is to allow children to watch cartoons during meals so that they become passive and let themselves be fed (even when they are old enough to eat by themselves).

On the one hand, impersonal institutional practices ("It was like a chicken coop..."). On the other hand, unhappy experiences at home ("...till I ran to my room in tears."). This is the double heritage we must overcome in planning an educational lunchtime.

WHAT IS IT?

Educational lunchtime is a situation which involves children as protagonists. It consists of various factors, logistical, practical and social. To work, it requires the collaboration of the entire working staff: educators, helpers, cook, pedagogical coordinator and administration. The guidelines for an educational lunchtime are similar

to those for explorative play ("gioco euristico"):

- A careful preparation of the setting: space, time and materials.
- An adult who accompanies and supports the children, without doing for them what they are proudly learning to do for themselves.
- Tidying as an integral part of the experience.

BEHIND THE SCENES

An educational lunchtime requires much work and organisation behind the scenes:

- * **Personnel.** Cook, helpers, administrators, suppliers...
- * **Groceries.** Carrots, potatoes, meat, bread...
- * **Objects.** Pots and pans, blender, trolley, dishes, cutlery...
- * **Thinking.** Lunchtime is thought through, again and again. One considers and gives value to every detail ("the large details"). For example:
 - * How can we make the rotation of waiters' turns understandable to the children?
 - * Which are better, plastic drinking cups or real glass glasses?
 - * In clearing the table, exactly where on the trolley does one put the dirty dishes?
 - * Is the cutlery really child size? Do the utensils for serving oneself from the platter have handles too long to be manageable?

There is no end to possible improvements!

WELLBEING

An educational lunchtime is a pleasant occasion. Children like being at the table, it is not a duty which is forced on them. Various factors contribute to wellbeing at lunchtime: **Good food.** Wholesome ingredients prepared with skill. **No hurry.** Plenty of time to eat calmly (within reasonable limits, with respect for those who work in the kitchen). Time almost seems to stand still (one says: "At the table one doesn't grow older.")

Organisation. 1) The setting is carefully predisposed. On the side table there is everything one needs (dishes, cutlery, water, bread, oil...). 2) One eats in small, stable groups, each group at its own table. 3) Every person has his own place.

Reassuring rituals. The repeated daily gestures of personal care become rituals. Washing one's hands before lunch, for example, is a ritual. So is washing them again and rinsing one's face after lunch. The "routine rituals" are full of ever new nuances in relationships and skills. They never become boring.

Good company. There is continuity in the relationships among those at the table. One knows each other, one looks at each other, one converses.

Interest. There are many interesting things to do at the table, small achievements which might go unnoticed (biting off a piece of bread with one's first baby teeth; pouring oneself water from a small pitcher; tipping the soup bowl to scoop up the last spoonfuls of soup; using tongs to serve oneself salad; using a piece of bread to get up the last sauce on the plate...).

Acoustics. Conversation is possible. One hears the sounds of things (a glass placed into another glass while piling them on the trolley; the cutlery which one lets drop into the basin...).