

# Learning lunchtime independence

**Elizabeth Sather** describes a typical lunchtime at Living Spring Montessori Nursery to highlight the elements of children's independence that are part of the routine.

“**T**hey grew and they grew and they did not stop!” a small group of toddlers recite, excitement mounting with each word until – more or less in unison – they all do a single clap to finish the rhyme of the five little pea pods. Big smiles all around the table and even some giggles; a teacher asks a little boy which song he would



Anyone walking into the room would think this group of toddlers (between the ages of 18 months and 2½ years) are participating in a planned music and rhyme session. Rather, they are actually waiting for the rest of their classmates to finish coming in from playing outside.

The song is momentarily interrupted by a second group of toddlers who walk into the room with a teacher. Together

**The children's needs are met; they are given individual attention, the chance to “do it by myself” and the opportunity to make choices and follow interests, thus making eating together as a community an essential component of the children's daily routine**

like to sing, and he promptly replies “digger”. The teacher takes her cue and begins to sing a version of “Down by the Station”, adapted so that it features diggers and the table of children begin to sing along enthusiastically.



they go over to the sink, where they form a queue to wash their hands one-by-one, rolling up sleeves and lathering soap on their hands with varying degrees of functional independence. Kneeling down to make eye contact a teacher assists each child. One by one they wash their hands at the low sink, soap and a hand towel laid out within reach for independent access. Each child finds a place at the table after drying their hands.

The atmosphere is one of pleasant social interaction. By now the whole class had finished playing and exploring in the garden, and they were making the transition into lunchtime.

The children helping on the day had prepared the tables with an adult before going outside. Every place is set with a large napkin and a clothes peg (for each child to fasten around his or her neck to protect their clothes while eating), a small tray; laid out with a child-sized jug, drinking glasses, and a



wiping cloth on each tray to prepare for spills.

Once everyone is seated and they have recited “The Thank You Poem”, each child is given the opportunity to pour his or her own drinking water. The teachers look on, but the guidelines are given by the children themselves: “Not too much!” many of them exclaims as they hold up a glass filled only halfway. Children wipe up their spills with the cloth provided.

The children then begin to serve themselves, scooping pasta out of the dish with a serving spoon. The room is quiet while the toddlers tuck into pasta and chicken.

Once finished, children begin to get up and push their chairs in, going over to the bin to scrape their bowls and to put their dishes and forks into the tub on the floor next to the bin with care. They then go to the mirror to wipe their faces and hands with a wet flannel, putting dirty flannels in the

**The cultural and psychological environment of mealtime is just as important as the daily routine and the preparation of the tables. Eating together is a special time for socializing: children and adults share songs, conversations and even jokes.**

laundry basket next to the sink, and then on to their rest mats to relax after a busy morning.

The Nido, which cares for babies ranging in ages between 9 and 18 months, has a similar lunch routine to that of the Infant Community, although adjusted to meet the needs of these younger children. The babies come into their class from the corridor in small groups, participating in songs and rhymes and putting away their slippers, while the more mobile amongst them hang up their coats on their pegs.

Rather than queuing in front of a sink the babies either wash their hands and faces with warm soapy flannels, or have them washed by an adult, depending on their ability.

The babies sit clustered in small groups around the adults who care for them. The more verbal among them point and name familiar items they see, “spoon!”, “fork!” and after they have been told what they are having for lunch, “chicken!” The babies’ attempts at communication are acknowledged and encouraged, for example, one little girl hold her bib up and says “bib”, her teachers says “bib on” and helps her to put it on. When a baby points and shouts out the names of her classmates, she is gently reminded “to use an indoor voice” by a teacher who softly repeats each child’s name. The baby then repeats the names, this time copying the tone and volume modelled by the adult.

In both classrooms, the adults eat with the children, giving individual help and supporting newly acquired skills such as eating with a spoon and tipping the bowl slightly to get the last bit of the pasta out. All of the classrooms use real crockery, child-sized spoons and forks. By the time the children move to the Infant Community, they understand the need to be gentle when placing their bowl into the tub to ensure that it does not break.

The children drink water from real glasses; the

foundation of this skill is laid in the Nido. Babies start by being given a very small amount of water in a real glass and as they spill less and less from regular practice, they are gradually given more water in their glasses.

All of the children are given just enough help to function independently and polite phrases such as “more, please!” and “thank you” are role-modelled. They are allowed to eat at their own pace, and eat as much as they would like, with frequent requests for seconds. They are given options, “Are you finished or would you like some more?” Non-verbal communication is acknowledged as well, when one baby pushes his bowl away, he is asked if he is finished, he nods and when the teacher takes his bowl, he waves and says “bye-bye”.

The teachers’ calm “help me to help myself” scaffolding approach ensures that each child’s skills are developed by giving just enough assistance necessary during each part of the task at hand. For example, one child may need to be shown how to turn the tap all off the way or another to be shown how to roll up his sleeves during hand washing. In the Nido, a lot of practice is needed to drink from a real glass. A teacher is on hand to make sure that each little step, or “point of consciousness” is developed and refined by role modelling and through appropriate support. As the children’s skills grow, they are given less and less help until they are able to perform the whole task independently. A day to day task such as washing hands is treated as an opportunity for learning and development, rather than a chore.

Preparing flannels for washing faces and hands at the end of lunchtime and setting the tables are jobs which the toddlers enjoy; enabling them to be active participants in their daily routine.



The physical environment is prepared with the children’s independence in mind: each child has their own peg, which is labelled with their name and their photo. From early on, they can easily identify the place for their own belongings. All children are shown how to find their belongings by looking for their own peg, starting in the Nido. Babies even crawl down the corridor to find their slippers or shoes, once toddling; they are given more responsibilities, such as hanging their own coat up on their peg.

The cultural and psychological environment of mealtime is just as important as the daily routine and the preparation of the tables. Eating together is a special time for socializing: children and adults share songs, conversations and even jokes. The adults at the meal table have the opportunity to role model friendly behaviour such as active listening and courteous table manners to the children in a relaxed atmosphere. The children enjoy this special time to be together in small groups or even one-to-one with their key person, or another familiar adult. Positive attention and interactions usually encourage our children “to behave”. The children’s needs are met; they are given individual attention, the chance to “do it by myself” and the opportunity to make choices and follow interests, thus making eating together as a community an essential component of the children’s daily routine at Living Spring Montessori.

**Elizabeth Sather** is the Deputy Manager at Living Spring Montessori Nursery in Cricklewood. She completed the AMI 3-6 training at the Montessori Institute Northwest (Portland Oregon) and a Master’s of Education at Loyola College, Baltimore Maryland.

