



Mealtimes

Mealtimes offer great opportunities for families to come together for conversation and connection. One study, Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), found that kids who sit down to family meals regularly, tend to do well in school, avoid risky behaviors, eat more healthfully, and have a lower risk of developing eating disorders. Family meals can provide parents an opportunity to consistently model good eating habits, and to show kids what balanced meals look like. Parents are also more likely to spot potential eating problems.

However, sometimes fights over food, power struggles, and threats can disrupt the ideal picture of a nice, shared meal.



Guidelines for Successful and Healthy Meal Times

Get in the meal habit: The meal doesn't have to be fancy. Just pick a time, remove distractions (TV, toys, electronics), place food on the table and eat together at least once a day.

Come to the table hungry: Snacking too close to meal times sabotages any hope children will eat a meal. Limit free access to food and drinks (except water) between meals; offer healthy snacks spaced out between meals. Eliminate sugary foods, if possible, which can alter the body's natural craving for healthy foods.

Set appropriate expectations for each age level: Toddlers might be able to sit for 5-10 minutes. Preschoolers might sit for a little longer. School age children might sit until the end of the meal. Forcing children to sit beyond their capabilities creates stressful meals.

Babies and toddlers will play with food, spill their milk and drop food on the floor. This is appropriate behavior, not misbehavior. When the food is played with more than it is eaten, your toddler is done with the meal. Teach your children to help you clean up the mess.

Avoid the short order cook role: Feed your family the food that is placed on the table. Don't offer a substitute main dish if your child rejects it. Respond to their, "I don't want to eat it," with a non-attached, "That's fine. Let me know if you change your mind. But this is what we are eating tonight."

Some families do let older children fix a sandwich or quesadilla if they don't like the meal. This is better than fixing special meals for each child.



Let go of trying to please every eater at every meal: Provide each eater at least one or two items they generally enjoy. If your child chooses not to eat one thing, don't worry. Let them choose from the various healthy food choices you've placed upon their plate.

Don't force children to eat everything on their plate: This trains children to over eat and can create life-long obesity issues. It also forces children to eat foods they may not care for which invites power struggles and rebellion. Teach children to take small servings at first, letting them know they can have seconds later.

Don't spoon feed your child: Your job is to provide the food on the plate; it's each eater's job to get it into their mouths.

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Division of Responsibilities

Parent role: Provide the meal structure

- Determine foods to be served
- Set meal and snack times
- Remove distractions during meals
- Make meals pleasant
- Model good eating habits and manners

Child role: Make choices

- Choose what they will eat
- Decide whether they eat at all
- Determine how much they eat

Misbehavior at Mealtime

To Prevent Misbehavior:

- Communicate and model your expectations of behavior at the table. Children need information and practice in order to be successful mealtime participants. You will decide how formal or how casual your family's meals will be.
- Acknowledge children's efforts to meet the expectations: "Thank you for using your napkin." "I appreciate you saying 'please'."
- Involve children in aspects of the meal planning and food preparation. Children are much more likely to eat foods they help choose and prepare. Young children can be given two choices, "Shall we serve carrots or peas tonight for dinner? You get to choose." Older children can be included in the actual meal planning.
- Children can wash fruits and veggies, butter bread, taste for flavor, help you stir, add in ingredients, tear lettuce, etc. Older children can cook entire dishes.
- Avoid power struggles by refraining from constantly nagging your child. Keep your focus on your food choices, your manners, your participation in conversation, not on nagging your child to eat more vegetables.
- Avoid using guilt, rewards, or threats to control your child's eating. These tactics create bad feelings and power struggles.
- Establish a rule that when meals are over, they are truly over. Children will learn very quickly to eat when meals are served. When children test this rule by refusing to eat and want a full meal an hour later, empathize but stick to the rule. "I'm sorry to hear you're hungry. The next meal will be in the morning; I hope you decide to eat then. For now, I can offer a hug or a book to read."

When Misbehaviors Occur:

- Set clear mealtime expectations and follow through with kind and firm action. For instance, when food is thrown or beverages are dumped (with the exception for babies), say with calm, confidence: "Food is not for throwing. I'm walking you away from the table until you are ready not to throw anymore." Or "The mealtime is over. You are welcome to join us at the next meal."
- When caught up in an emotional conflict, back off, cool down, and state your feelings: "I'm frustrated because I want to enjoy my food right now." Apologize for your part of the conflict, "I'm sorry I screamed at you."
- When you're calm, help your child calm down. Acknowledge her feelings, "I can see you're upset right now." Offer a calm touch, offer a Positive Time Out, (see Positive Time Out tip sheet), offer a kind invitation, "I'd love for you to rejoin us when you feel better."

Going Deeper

Keep in mind that the long-term goal is to make mealtimes and healthy eating a pleasant experience. The focus should not be on exactly how much milk or how many bites of pasta was swallowed. Parents can make meals pleasant by having conversations, not interrogations.

- Share bits about your day; invite but don't force your child to share about his.
- Seek opinions about certain events or topics with genuine curiosity.
- Listen attentively to your children when they share their thoughts.
- Talk about the food you are eating. "What do you think of this new dish?" "This tastes salty to me." "This has a crunchy texture."

Key Steps

- **Get in the mealtime habit.**
- **Monitor snacks so kids come to the table ready to eat.**
- **Expect limited ability to sit for long periods.**
- **Don't fix special meals for each person; serve a variety of foods and let each eater choose what they want to eat.**
- **Involve children in choosing and preparing foods.**
- **Don't force kids to eat everything on their plate or eat foods they dislike.**
- **Help young children serve small amounts on their plate to limit waste.**
- **Don't use guilt, rewards or threats.**
- **Communicate clearly when meals begin and end.**
- **Follow through with kind and firm action when needed.**