

Family Meal Time

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Meal time is about more than putting food into our bodies. The family meal also offers:

- Together Time: a chance to talk and connect as a family
- Training Ground: a place to learn polite manners and the art of conversation
- Routine and Rituals: grounding in a reassuringly predictable experience
- Healthy Habits: modelling, practicing and discussing healthy eating and exercise

There are many steps you can take to make meals enjoyable and pleasant for everyone.

First, remember that your role is to offer healthy food and be a good role model for healthy eating. But, your child will choose what to eat and how much to eat. Don't turn meals into a power struggle.

Involve your child in choosing and preparing the food. They are often more willing to eat a variety of foods if they were involved in making it. Ask your child to help prepare for the meal, perhaps by carrying things to the table, setting the table, turning off the TV, or calling other family members in.

Eat at the dining table or in the kitchen. Not in the play room, or in front of the TV, or in a bedroom.

Put out a variety of healthy foods. Let your child serve himself, choosing how much to put on his plate (encourage him to start with small servings – reassuring him he can always have more). Be a good role model in your own food choices and portion sizes.

A two year old can use a spoon and a fork, drink from a regular cup, and feed herself a wide variety of finger foods. Allow for some mess – children are learning how to eat neatly. Help her use a napkin to wipe her face if needed, but don't feel like you have to hover over her and clean up after bite. You may need to set limits on mess-making. If she starts throwing food or intentionally dropping it, end the meal. Take her away from the table and clean up the food. (Don't worry if she didn't eat "enough". She won't starve between now and the next meal, and we want her to get the message.)

During the meal, engage in conversation. Many families have a ritual question, such as "highs and lows" or "what is one thing you learned today" or "what is one thing you were grateful for today."

Allow plenty of time at the table. At least 20 minutes for a meal. When your child is full, he can leave the table, but make clear that means he's done – he can't come and grab bites then run off to play.

Help your child recognize when she is full – this will decrease the chance of later obesity. Don't praise children for a clean plate. Reward them with attention, kind words and fun activities, not food.

Don't restrict certain foods – they may overeat them when they can. Offer small amounts of dessert items with the rest of the food – don't set it aside as the "special" part of the meal.

Clean up together. Involve them in clearing the table, and wiping the table.

Family meals matter: research shows kids who regularly eat with their families do better in school, have better self esteem, make healthier food choices, and are less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol.