

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. Some ideas:

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 the food. Take them grocery shopping. Give them a reasonable number of choices to make and discuss with them how to choose some healthy foods and some treats.

Involve your child in 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 to the table.

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 themselves, choosing how much to put on their plate (encourage them to start with small servings – reassuring them they can always have more). Be a good role model in your own food choices and portion sizes.

Encourage your child to use age-appropriate tools such as forks, knives, regular cups, napkins, etc. Teach appropriate table manners.

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. When your child is full, they can leave the table, but make clear that means they're done – they can't come and grab bites then run off to play.

Help your child recognize when they are 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 then overeat them when they get the chance. Offer small amounts of dessert 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.

Resources for nutrition information: "Ages and Stages" section of HealthyChildren.org has specific nutrition recommendations for each age group (toddler, preschool, elementary). For daily food plans:

<https://www.myplate.gov/life-stages>. For tip sheets on specifics like fiber, iron, and fats:

www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nibbles