

## Eating, Mealtime, and Restaurants

According to the number of questions I get on the Web site, mealtime and the subject of eating probably rates number one as the most annoying behavior issue, ahead of bedtime and getting everyone ready in the morning. And topping the list of complaints around eating includes the kids not eating what was served, they won't remain seated during mealtime, they're picky about what they want, or they argue and fight across the table with each other. It drives parents to the point where they dread mealtime and eventually move toward allowing family members to eat when they want. But when parents allow a transition to occur away from the traditional meal, the family loses the connection it so desperately needs.

Sometimes kids won't eat because it may be an extension of the power struggle we experience with them in other areas. They feel overpowered, bossed around, or simply small, during the majority of the day, and then discover at mealtime that YOU now want something from them. Others just don't like trying something new and others may have real dislikes for tasting or eating certain foods. Or perhaps they're just not hungry because they were allowed to snack too much earlier in the day. It is also common for children to become run down and tired by the evening meal, or pepped up and on their second wind.

Taking measures to stop the chaos begins with recognizing what may be going on with you over this conflict. Are you recreating the control your parents had over you in forcing you to eat? Depending on the time and conditions of your childhood, food may not have been as plentiful as it is now and your parents were trained by their parents to eat when it was available. Some parents overreact to a child not eating, feeling a sense of fear that if they don't get the child to eat; their child may starve and develop eating disorders. In actuality, the parent's over reaction can create eating disorders. Avoid forcing a child to eat what is prepared because it will

drive them further away from cooperating or being interested in eating in a healthy manner. The parents manner of behavior during an emotionally charged moment can make a child's challenging behavior even worse.

As a solution to getting the kids to eat, I suggest parents establish a readily available alternative to whatever is being served and allow the children to have the power to choose between the prepared meal and this new established alternative. The established alternative must not be anything sweet and must not require special preparation. When my kids were little, our established alternative was a cup of dry Cheerios; the kids could select what Mom or Dad prepared for dinner or a cup of Cheerios. For some of our children, the alternative was the immediate selection in the beginning. As most parents do, I worried about them getting the proper nutrition if all they ever ate for dinner was Cheerios. But because we were consistent with our rules and boundaries, the Cheerios soon grew old and we found the children more willing to eat the prepared, hot food. Then as they grew older, we added a few more alternatives such as crackers and eventually, a PB&J sandwich. We never allowed sugared cereals or cookies, and the PB&J wasn't allowed until they were old enough to prepare it themselves. The object of the alternative is to give them a choice at meal time and make it something very simple to fix that they can eventually fix themselves.

Here are a few words of wisdom regarding restaurants... **THEY WERE MADE FOR ADULTS!** If you are struggling with getting the kids to behave when the family is eating out, do one of the following: go to a "kid-friendly" restaurant that caters to children, bring a bag of activities to keep them busy and focused, or get a baby sitter and eat out alone occasionally as a couple. My granddaughter, like her mother, was always a challenge at restaurants. She talked loud, got up and down from her chair constantly, picked fights with her brother, threw her menu

on the floor to see if anyone would pick it up, leaned over the walls and planters to talk to other patrons, and constantly shouted to the wait staff walking by, saying, “Excuse me, I need a new red crayon. Mine broke!” One evening when she was about five, we went into a very busy seafood restaurant just outside of August, GA. At the time she was going through a phase of calling seafood “pirate food.” The waiting area of this obviously popular eating establishment was packed and people were crammed into the air conditioned waiting area. During our wait to be called for our table, my granddaughter Aurora went up to every individual, asking them if they liked “pirate food.” When she ran out of people in the waiting area, she decided to run into the main dining area to ask each person what they ordered. When we were finally seated, I took the multi-colored sugar packets and came up with a game for her to organize and make shapes with. That activity barely lasted until our meal arrived and when she decided that she had had enough, it was a battle keeping her from engaging other customers with her questions and comments. We knew it was time for us to leave when she began to cry and refused to get up off the floor under the table. After that night, we became regular customers at the local Chuck E Cheese.

One final thought about kids and eating; keep portions small. Overloading a child’s plate with food can be overwhelming to them. Give them very small amounts of all the items prepared for the meal and allow them to ask for more. Putting a full plate of food in front of your child could be like saying “go explore space!”

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