

Eating, Mealtime, and Restaurants

Based on parents' questions on my Web site, mealtime and the subject of eating rates number one as the most annoying behavior issue, even ahead of bedtime and getting everyone ready in the morning. Topping the list of complaints about eating are that the kids won't eat what was served, they won't remain seated during mealtime, they're picky about what they want, and they argue and fight across the table with each other. These behaviors can cause parents to dread mealtime and eventually move toward allowing family members to eat when they want. But a transition away from the traditional meal can mean family members lose the connection they so desperately need.

Sometimes kids won't eat because they are extending the power struggle we experience with them in other areas. They may 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 us, as parents, recognizing what may be going on behind the scenes. Are we recreating the control our parents had over us in forcing eating at mealtimes? Depending on the time and conditions of our childhoods, food may not have been as plentiful as it is now, and our parents may have been trained by their parents to eat when it was available. Some parents may overreact to a child not eating, feeling a sense of fear that their child may starve or develop eating disorders. In actuality, the parent's over reaction can create eating disorders. We must 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, thus 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 mealtime – a choice that is simple enough for them to 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 sitter and eat out alone occasionally as a couple. My granddaughter, like her mother, was always a challenge at restaurants. She talked loudly, 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, 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. 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 during our wait to be called for our table, my granddaughter Aurora went up to every individual, asking 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 an organizing and shape game. 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. Give very small amounts of all the items prepared for the meal and allow children to ask for more. Putting a full plate of food in front of your child can be like saying, “Go explore space!”

Bill Corbett is the author of the book “Love, Limits, & Lessons,” in English and in Spanish, and the executive director of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. You can visit his Web site www.CooperativeKids.com for more information and parenting advice.