

Congenial Mealtimes

A parent's guide to peace at the dinner table

Carole Disseldorp is a Parent Educator with 32 years experience working with children and parents. In this article she guides us through some great tips on transforming the sometime battlefield of mealtimes into a pleasurable experience for both parent and child.

Julie loves to put her hands in her soup and extract the animal pasta. Dimitri, who is 2 years old, complains loudly that he doesn't like the green stuff and pushes it off his plate. Shanae spills her drink, and Fynn won't sit still at the table at meal time. Seem familiar?

Many parents dread mealtimes to such an extent they will sometimes give their children less healthy food in order just to see their children consuming some food in a peaceful way. Power struggles often develop when family members have different ideas about what kind of food and how much of it should be eaten.

Children have their own ideas about staying put at a table for a certain amount of time – often not very long! Many parents expect to retain the right to serve all the food, and have their children sit still and eat without complaint for the duration of the meal.

Children are often expected to eat a meal while a parent hovers over them, or sits absorbed in another activity which doesn't involve food. Parents would like their offspring to eat nicely with cutlery (if old enough), and keep their food on a plate or bowl, and their drink in a cup. Many parents would much prefer that their children's legs and voices were completely dormant throughout the meal.



All these conflicting desires are a recipe for unenjoyable mealtimes and can be managed much more successfully.

The tips below will help families to enjoy meal times and to consume healthy food in a socially acceptable manner. Interesting conversation and serving of food at the table will be encouraged. Family members will be able to sit together, eat together, and relate to each other with eye contact and calm voices. I have developed these tips after spending many years raising my own 4 children and working with many other children.

So here goes...

- Place a bowl or plate of healthy food and some water on the table.
- Sit down with the children and serve some for yourself.
- Show genuine enjoyment when eating and ask if anyone would like some food.
- Give or allow children to serve themselves a **small** portion (if old enough) when they are seated properly at the table.
- Have a conversation about anything **other than** the reason for eating good food (of course good nutrition needs to be discussed occasionally).
- Praise children for sitting nicely, eating nicely, waiting patiently etc.
- Say **nothing** about the **amount** they are eating.
- If they don't wish to eat anything offered say nothing, stay seated and continue eating.
- Give positive reinforcement to the children that are sitting down properly.
- If they leave the table ask them to please sit down at the table and join the family.
- If they don't do so, ignore them (whilst keeping an eye on them for safety).
- After several courses on plates or in bowls, offer plain bread or fruit if little has been eaten.
- Don't have too many choices and stick to healthy foods.
- If giving treats, give at the end of meals and ensure they are **small**.
- Keep junk foods out of reach in the kitchen cupboards or fridge.
- If children don't eat at a particular meal, they might not be hungry and will probably eat more at the next meal.
- When they are ill or upset they may lose their appetite temporarily.
- Children will naturally eat the amount of food that they need, and the type of food that they require when offered healthy choices.
- Avoid power struggles at all costs.
- If children play with utensils or food excessively take it away after a warning.
- Variety is the spice of life.
- Everybody has different food preferences.

I hope this helps any parents having mealtime difficulties. There is no doubt that mealtimes can be an amazing opportunity to learn more about and bond with your children. Most of all – if you enjoy mealtimes so will they.

Written by Carole Disseldorp - Parent Educator and Director of Easier Parenting - www.easierparenting.com.au