

Mission Possible: Family Mealtimes



Busy lifestyles and readily available fast foods are two reasons family meals are being crowded out of daily routines. Researchers are finding that sitting down together for meals in a pleasant environment might be one of the most meaningful bonding activities families can make time for.

Research also shows that most families want to share more family meals and feel better when they do. But that's not to say it's easy! In fact, with so many food options and so many other activities competing for limited time, it's increasingly difficult to gather for a sit-down meal.

In addition, researchers point out that for some families, a lot of unpleasant issues tend to surface at the dinner table. There may be a picky eater in your midst, or good table manners may be discussed at every meal. Complaints about eating too much or too little, or having too many sweets may crop up. **All of these zap the fun and benefits from family mealtimes.**

A few tips for putting the fun back in family meals:

- Set a realistic goal. Can you eat dinner together four times a week? Five times a week? Build a plan that takes into account the schedule you have now. Then try to stick with that plan and make eating together a priority from wherever you are now.
- Eat with your children. When children see you eating healthy food and watch you limit portion sizes, they're likely to follow your lead.
- Make mealtimes something to look forward to. Leave troubles behind and talk about pleasant things that happened

during the day. Share a joke or make plans for the evening.

- Let children help with food preparation. Being part of the process helps children see their important role in the family, and makes them more willing to try something new.
- Serving takeout or sitting down at a restaurant counts. The important thing is to be available to your children.
- Don't bribe children to eat by promising dessert. Health experts say this sends the wrong message that the good stuff is really the dessert.
- Encourage but don't make children eat certain foods. Forcing them to do so may increase their dislike of that food.
- Don't enforce the clean-your-plate rule. Researchers say it's not a good one. The goal is to get children to understand their own body cues so they can stop eating when they're full.
- Keep it simple. Elaborate meals aren't the point. Have you tried the Crock-Pot lately? It makes a no-fuss meal that's ready when everyone gets home.
- Do something different once in a while. Light a candle, place flowers in the center of the table, or change up the napkins, plates, and place mats.
- Watch serving sizes, whether you're at home or eating out.
- Turn off the TV and return phone calls after your meal.
- Think of mealtimes as a way to reconnect and nurture the family connection.

For a fun activity, fill a bowl with topics to talk about and place it in the middle of the table. Each member of the family gets a turn to pull out a topic for discussion.

PERSONAL PARENTING

Photo Collage Place Mats

Making these place mats is a good way to get photos out of shoeboxes and albums so the family can enjoy them every day.

What you need:

Glue, Photos, Crayons, and Markers, Construction paper, Contact paper

- Place a dab of glue on the back of each photo.
- Press the photo onto the paper.
- Let children add personal touches with crayons and markers.
- When finished, laminate with contact paper.

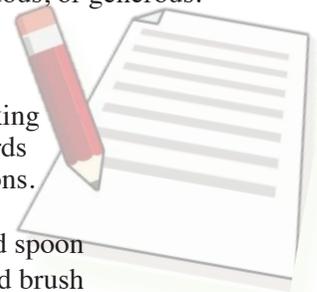


World of Words

Children acquire language faster during the first five years of life than at any other time in their development. Here are some tips and games that help.

Vocabulary Workout

- Get in the habit of asking questions that encourage more than a simple “yes” or “no.”
If you could invent a game, what would it be?
- When talking with children, throw in a word once in a while that they may not be familiar with, such as elegant, curious, stupendous, or generous.



Word Pairs

This word activity is a great logical thinking exercise. Start off with some simple words that go together or have strong associations.

EXAMPLES: Pencil and paper Fork and spoon
Bat and ball Paint and brush
Shoes and socks Fingers and toes

You'll say the first word (like “pencil”) and wait for your child to say the second (“paper”). The idea is to challenge children by making them think, but it's also important that they feel successful. Begin with the easiest word pair and proceed to more difficult associations.

FLAVORED BUTTERS

Flavored butters are so easy to make, and kids can see and taste them after just a few minutes. These recipes add pizzazz to toast, pancakes, or a special meal. Mix together in a mixer and refrigerate.

Lemon Butter

1/2 cup (1 stick) butter
1 Tbsp. grated lemon zest

Sweet Cinnamon Butter

1 cup (2 sticks) butter
1/3 cup brown sugar
1/3 cup honey
3/4 tsp. cinnamon

MAKE A “FAVORITE THINGS” BOOK

Preschoolers and older children can make books about their favorite things from recycled paper or construction paper.

- Gather old magazines, catalogs, greeting cards, or calendars that can be cut up. Let children cut out pictures of their favorite things and glue them onto the paper. The pages can then be stacked and stapled together, or hole-punched and tied together with ribbon or yarn.

Examples of books to create:
favorite toys, favorite animals, favorite foods, favorite holidays, favorite pets, favorite games, or favorite things to do as a family.



THEN & NOW

We hear a lot about portion sizes these days, and those sizes have changed over the years. Compare these examples of sugary, fatty snack foods and drinks—it's easy to see some changes are in order!

Diameter of an average cookie (1980s):	1.5 inches
Diameter of an average cookie (2012):	3.5 inches
Amount of regular soda kids drank daily (1977):	4 ounces
Amount of regular soda kids drank daily (2006):	9 ounces
Average serving of fries (1980s):	2.4 ounces: 210 calories
Average serving of fries (2012):	6.9 ounces: 610 calories

It's not easy, but parents are children's greatest defense against improper diets. Too many snacks filled with empty calories spoil appetites for nutritious meals. Teach your kids to eat what will fit in their hand. Make sure the good stuff, is always close at hand. Kids will eat yogurt with cut-up fruit, edamame, a cheese stick, veggie sticks with dip, or celery with peanut butter if the other stuff isn't around.



The Patient Parent

In the book *Heaven on Earth: A Handbook for Parents of Young Children*, Sharifa Oppenheimer talks about being “The Sun.” She elegantly reminds us that we are the center of our child’s universe, and that our peace and calm can be the axis of our child’s world. Being centered, in Oppenheimer’s words, requires us to know very clearly “what our expectations are, what our boundaries are, and what the logical consequence of crossing the boundary is.”

When all is going smoothly, the kids are following directions, and you’ve slept well, being patient isn’t difficult. Patience only needs to be put into practice those times when your child has asked for the same thing 10 times, when she spills orange juice on the carpet, or when you are managing on five hours of sleep.

Let’s face it, sometimes children will find us distracted, rushed, or irritated. As parents, we occasionally (or even more often) lose our temper, and at minimum our words come off sharper than we intended. It’s important to remember that words said in anger can stay lodged in the hearts and minds of children for a long time. So, in spite of our current habits and busy schedules, patience is an important skill to utilize, and it’s never too late to begin practicing.

Ready for Action

Once you’ve adjusted your lifestyle to include both control and balance, then you have provided yourself with a foundation from which patience can be practiced and maybe even “almost” perfected.

If you start to feel your nerves fraying and the aggravated-parent persona begins seeping through, there are a few simple skills you can utilize to become “The Sun” again.

Setting the Stage: Control and Balance

The first step in creating a patient relationship with your child is to control any external factors that you can. Is there a way to prepare for the day ahead of time? Is your child aware of your expectations for the activities of the day? Have you allotted enough time for transitions? If you find yourself frequently feeling impatient, look back over the day and determine the factors you can control. There are always factors that we can’t predict, but we can control some things, and that helps.

The requirements for patient parenting are that we have solid sleep, nourishing food, exercise, and a sense of purpose. Handling the day with patience requires parents to be in balance. Examine the overall balance of your schedule. Are you too busy? Is your child? Have you given back to yourself or taken time for yourself? If you contemplate your life and find that it’s grossly out of alignment, the best thing to do is to take steps to simplify. Simplify your schedule, simplify your expectations, and simplify your routine.

Count to 10

- Just counting can help you remember to be patient

Breathe

- Take a few slow and deliberate breaths before responding

Pretend someone is watching

- It’s easier to use our best parenting skills when we think someone is watching

Laugh

- Not everything has to be taken seriously

Take a break

- Remove yourself momentarily