

THE PEACEFUL FAMILY TABLE

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Mealtime hassles are one of the most common problems in everyday family life. Does any of the following ring a bell? Johnny doesn't like carrots and Mary won't eat anything but meat. Jane is on a diet so wants Mom to cook a completely separate meal for her. Dad usually comes home late from work so he rarely eats with the family. Steve often forgets to tell anyone he won't be home for dinner at all. The kitchen table is used for homework as everyone has dinner on the couch in front of the TV. Sports schedules often have the family eating in relays!

We know that one of the most valuable aspects of family life is positive communication, and the best time for getting a family together is around the family table. How can we do this when the habits of today's society has eliminated any chance of it happening?

We should start at the beginning. A successful family has 'positive communication' as one of its core values. How can this be achieved? One way is to make sure that at some time each day, everyone gets together to talk about their highlights and their concerns, providing opportunity for family members to support and encourage one another. Mealtimes are the obvious time to be together. To make it happen, 'mealtime togetherness' has to be a priority and should be modeled by parents.

Mealtimes ought to be a peaceful, enjoyable experience and shouldn't be monopolized by arguments about food. Kids will become fussy eaters if we allow them to be. They should not be given choices with their vegetables and meats (unless they have food allergies of course.) From the beginning, there should be an expectation that kids will eat what they are given. This is not an unreasonable expectation as long as the portions are small. We never made mealtimes a battle of wills in our home. Our kids knew there would be no dessert if they did not eat their main meal. We never made them sit there until they had cleaned their plate. It was merely taken away without a fuss and they knew they could not have anything else until the next meal. We never wavered from that rule. Without the battle of food fussiness and poor table manners, it allowed us to have quality connection time with one another.

So what do you do to change established patterns? You have a family meeting and discuss your goals for quality communication time. You explain your expectations clearly. Since it is a top priority to be at the table together, you work out how this can be achieved. Regarding food, you may suggest that you will serve the food in buffet style and that a small portion of everything must be tried. You explain the consequences of poor eating habits and table manners. You remove the food if it is not eaten, and you might remove the misbehaving child as required. There is no fuss or heated argument.

I can guarantee that if you stick to the expectations, and all family members abide by them, you will have peaceful and enjoyable meals together.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.