

THOSE MEALTIME HASSLES

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

I was visiting a family recently and the activity around the family table gave me much food for thought regarding the content of today's column. In this instance 4 year-old Lisa was having difficulty sitting still on a big chair while eating her dinner. Every few minutes she would slide off the chair and disappear before her parents saw her. When they did notice she was missing, she was retrieved, warned to stay on the chair and was periodically sent to 'time out' for not doing as she was told. Twenty-month-old sister, Jessica, sat in the highchair, in an agitated state, punctuating the air with high-pitched squealing when attention was not paid to her, as she deemed fit. I could tell the parents were finding the whole situation an ordeal, yet we didn't feel, as visitors, that we could make any suggestions for fear of being seen as interfering. I guess this scenario is a familiar one to many of you! How could this situation be transformed into the peaceful happy family time we all wish for?

Toddlers in highchairs all go through the various stages of learning how to feed themselves. At first they are fed, and then they practice feeding themselves. They use their hands, their spoon, or a fork. As part of the process, food gets everywhere: in their hair, up their nose, over the side and onto the floor, followed by the bowl. What a mess! Through all of this they learn that the highchair is for sitting in and for eating food. The routine is learned more quickly when it is just that – a routine. They should eat at around the same time each day. They shouldn't be left sitting in the chair waiting for their food. It should be available before they start getting agitated. They should eat, get cleaned up and get down. Praise for doing a job helps them understand what is expected of them.

When it is time to vacate the highchair and sit in an adult seat at the table, the child already knows that mealtime is about sitting still and eating food. Obviously they will need some kind of a booster seat initially so the plate is at a comfortable level for them to eat from and so that they feel included in the group. It is important to tell your child what you expect, even if you have to repeat yourself every day until they understand. "Lisa, it is time for dinner now. I am going to wash your hands and sit you at the table ready for your dinner. We are going to thank Jesus for our food and then I want you to sit quietly and still in your chair and eat. You may not get down until we say you can. Do you understand?" When Lisa does as you expect, praise her. If she plays with her food or tries to get off her seat, put your hand on her arm, have her look at you and repeat your expectations. If she still does not comply, tell her you will take her dinner away and she will have to sit still and wait till you have finished your dinner. If she still tries to leave the table, then 'time out' is a suggested measure. *Mean what you say.* Take the food away and do not serve it again if they have left the table.

Why do kids play up at the table? Sometimes they do not know how to behave because you may not have reinforced it. Sometimes they need help with their food, and are ignored. Maybe they have had food before dinner and are not hungry. Maybe they are over-tired because they didn't sleep well or you were out beyond their normal mealtime. Many times there is no routine and still more often there is no table! Many kids sit on the couch watching TV while they eat.

The family table is one of the most valuable places and times to be together as a family, to share experiences and to enjoy one another's company. Parents need to create the kind of environment where kids want to be there. Kids need to come to the table clean and hungry. Do not tolerate disobedience from small children. If they know what is expected and get plenty of guidance they will always remember meal times as some of their best memories.

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.