

Family Matters

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KEEPING KIDS AT THE TABLE

A recent article in a food magazine had a column on how to keep restless kids at the table during holiday dinners. Aside from the obvious question, what about every meal, most of the advice seems deeply flawed. The author suggests providing a distraction (crayons, paper, stickers), using bribes (having some prizes available to give to the child who sat the most politely and the longest - then, surprising all the children by giving a gift to every child), making it cool to stay seated (don't seat all of them together), asking them to put on a show (teach them a few magic tricks they can do before and after dinner), and getting them involved (have them toss the salad, pass the bread basket).

Unless you want to send your son or daughter off to college or into marriage without social skills, it's wise to start now and leave the distractions, bribes, and tricks behind.

Children as young as 18 months can sit at the table for 15 to 20 minutes if they are hungry. But, two to three year olds should be able to sit for a family meal without resorting to subterfuge.

Parents must first ensure that mealtime is mealtime, not playtime, tv time, video time, PSP or Leapster time. They must be in sync about the importance of family mealtime. Studies show that families who eat together have children who are less prone to obesity and drug addiction.

If your children have been snacking all day, they aren't going to be hungry and will be less likely to be interested in sitting at the table. So, a snack between meals seems appropriate but there should be a cut-off time when snacks are no longer available. They

should be involved in preparing the meal and setting the table. A child who cuts the carrots is more likely to eat them. Having a small pitcher on the table for filling an empty glass is a great incentive for staying seated and drinking more as well. Start expecting your child to set his/her own place; when successful, expect help with setting the rest of the places.

Then, be prepared to speak and listen. Describe your day; ask your spouse to describe his; ask your children to talk about their day. You may need some prompting questions - what went well, which friends did you see today, did the pet bird in your classroom do anything funny? Remember, this is not to be an unpleasant time, one of constant correction - elbows off the table, chew with your mouth closed, use your napkin, etc. Those

skills need to be instilled outside of mealtime and practiced there. Perhaps you can make the final part of mealtime a time to discuss after dinner activities. Shall we read first, or play games? Whose turn is it to choose the book, game? You might say

you feel like baking after dinner. Does anyone want to help?

When dinner is completed, everyone has a part. Each clears his/her own place; someone loads the dishwasher; someone washes the pots; someone crums and wipes off the table; someone sweeps the floor; someone returns the chairs to their place; placemats or table cloth refreshed as needed.

There is a boatload of work on the front end that results in a harmonious family meal with everyone sitting together, eating properly, having polite, social conversation, and working together as a family, but the payoff is huge.

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Countryside Montessori School

1985 Pflingsten Road, Northbrook • 847/498-1105 • countrysidemontessori.org