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Dinner Table Meals with Your Toddler

The benefits of including your toddler in at family dinner time

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Photo by Torsten Schon/Fotolia



When I was growing up, most of our meals happened around the kitchen table, but these days gathering an entire family for dinner can be complicated. With mealtimes being pushed back to accommodate work or after-school activities, toddlers are often fed different foods at different times from their parents and siblings. Making the effort to break bread as a family has many benefits for our littlest tablemates, though. Toddlers absorb everything from how to participate in a conversation to an open-minded attitude about new food when they join us at the table.

A sprinkle of good eating habits

Dietician Jennifer Nessel explains, "Kids learn by example. If they see you eating a variety of foods, they'll want to try them too." Nessel, a Prince George, B.C., mother of five-year-old Anja and two-year-old Cara, says small kids have a very clear idea of how much and when they need to eat. "Don't stress if they don't eat, or if they start to play with their food." If your child gets squirmy, "simply excuse her and let her play nearby with something more suitable while you continue your meal," suggests Nessel.

A dash of family ritual

Kids learn far more than good eating habits at the table. "It's where they learn what it means to be a family," says Miriam Weinstein, author of *The Surprising Power of Family Meals* (Steerforth). Weinstein explains that sharing a meal is one of the few times we "face each other and concentrate on each other. It's where we care for each other and nourish each other." Weinstein also believes that the stories we share around the table not only help with language and vocabulary development, but they also teach kids about our culture and values.

A dollop of togetherness

Weinstein says that including toddlers in the family meal shows them they are important members of the family. Lisa MacColl of Kitchener, Ont., found this was especially true during the holidays. Two-and-a-half-year-old Laura was thrilled when her mother included her in the Christmas meal by setting a place at the table for her, complete with a special placemat. "She was allowed to drink out of a 'big girl' glass and we gave her apple juice that looked like the wine that everyone else was drinking."

A smidgeon of simplicity

Many of us equate the family meal with hours in the kitchen and multiple courses. Jennifer Gruden of Scarborough, Ont., says she wanted the meal but not the fuss when eating with her two-year-old son Noah. "An easy, slow-cooker soup and cheese toast does it for me."

tips for happy dining

- Encourage your kids to participate in meal preparation. They can wash veggies, mix salad and place napkins.
- Turn off the TV, put on some calm music and let voice mail take your calls.
- Develop a ritual to start and end each meal—light candles, say a blessing or tell a story.
- Keep dinner conversation light and lively. Talk about your day and give everyone a chance to speak.
- Let your child leave the table if required—sitting for long periods is a learned skill.
- Accept that every meal won't be perfect and that's OK.

When Diane Selkirk's six-year-old daughter Maia was born, she and her husband traded dinner in front of the evening news for dinner as a family—and after researching this story, she's really glad they did.

great reasons to eat together

- 1** Eating together can protect toddlers from choking.
- 2** A Syracuse University study found children with asthma experience less stress, have fewer hospitalizations and miss fewer days of school when they participate in family meals.
- 3** A report by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University says teenagers who have frequent meals with their families are less likely to smoke, take drugs or drink alcohol.
- 4** Children are less likely to become obese or develop eating disorders if they have a positive experience with family meals, according to a 2004 study by University of Minnesota researchers.