

The Mealtime Blues

Mealtime is one of the most stressful times of the day. This is an area where a lot of old belief systems create problems for families. Many parents expect their young children to sit still at the table and eat all their food. We also teach them to stuff food into their bodies by bribing them with dessert.

What we get are kids who sit at the table with their mouths tightly shut, often refusing everything but dessert. The table can be a stage for negative attention-getting behaviour, and therefore a battle night after night.

There are many beliefs at work that can keep us in horrible power struggles:

Children should be able to sit still at the table before the age of 7.

Children must be taught good manners.

Children should eat when we tell them to.

They must finish their food.

Dessert is a reward for eating.

Children can't think for themselves about their own hunger or fullness.

How much is enough?

Nursing babies aren't told how much to eat, or forced to keep nursing when they have had enough. They know exactly how much their bodies need. As soon as they are eating solids and the amounts can be measured, the parents somehow assume that responsibility.

I have watched parents chase their children with two-hour-old hot dogs asking them to take one more bite. Yes, I know that they are just hungry later and want to eat between meals. Eating small amounts more often is actually a healthier way to eat. Don't make

Mealtime Blues

an issue about how much! Serve small amounts and know that children, when not forced, will choose a healthy balance for themselves. Your job is to provide the food but their responsibility is to eat it. Trust them, they won't starve themselves.

How long should they sit?

A lot depends on the child's activity level and of course their age. Allowing children to sit at the table for a short period of time doesn't teach them poor table manners. Children under three can't sit for more than a couple of minutes. You may end up eating separately or at different times during the young years. As they get a little older they will begin to sit for short periods of time. They will be more likely to sit if they are also part of preparing the meal or setting the table. If however, it is a tense experience, this process will take longer. Keep it pleasant and they will want to join you when they are in the mid-years.

Now that my children are young teens they enjoy cooking and have been part of the process for many years. They are the ones insisting that we come to the table.

With older children you can insist that conversation is respectful at the table. That means no talking about green slugs and no fighting. That is a boundary violation to you and crosses over the line. If they choose to fight or disrespect the boundaries, they can take their food elsewhere. Maybe you have an area where you can eat peacefully if this happens. Kids won't like it but taking action and protecting your needs is important.

Food Fads

Problems will arise during the toddler years when the child's appetite drops with their growth rate. Parents see their child eating less and begin to worry if they are getting enough. Most kids go through stages where they only want one thing. This is normal and it does pass. Don't make a big deal about it.

Sensitivities & Allergies

Be aware of the possibility of food sensitivities and allergies. The best way to discover whether your child is allergic to something is to remove suspect foods and then slowly re-introduce them into the child's diet. Food allergies can create changes in your child's

Mealtime Blues

behaviour. Kids sometimes dislike foods they are allergic to, and sometimes (in “addictive allergies”) crave them.

Creative Meals

Variety is the spice of life, and a little creativity sometimes helps introduce new foods to your children. We used to set up a tablecloth on the living room floor and have picnics in there in front of the fireplace. Putting a variety of foods on their plates in small amounts can keep mealtime interesting while introducing new tastes.

Mealtime Help

- *If they are not hungry after a few mouthfuls, don't feed their dinner to the dog! Put it in the fridge for later in case they get hungry before the next meal.*
- *Let children help select the dinner menu.*
- *Make food attractive and serve small amounts so you aren't stressed over wasted food.*
- *Let the child serve their own dinner onto their plate.*
- *Avoid having a running commentary on how much your children are eating. Keep your eyes off their plates!*
- *Teach children about nutrition so they can make healthy, informed decisions.*
- *Don't reward a child for eating or punish a child for not eating.*
- *Never use food (including desert) as a reward or withhold it as a punishment.*
- *If you know they don't like the food, make them a simple alternative, like a sandwich, or let them make it and clean up the mess themselves.*
- *Have the child clear their plate and put it in the dishwasher so you don't have to judge their consumption*
- *Let them cook! And, the sooner the better! Get them involved in cooking and they'll be more likely to eat something.*

Encourage Self Help

- *Keep a container of freshly chopped veggies and fruit in the fridge so the children can help themselves throughout the day between meals.*
- *Have plastic glasses in a bottom drawer and an easy-to-pour container in the fridge.*
- *Teach them how to cook and let them prepare meals for the family. Increase their skills as they grow older. (Be prepared to eat some weird stuff.)*
- *If they are stuck on one food, tell them they can have it three times that week and let them plan the weekly menu. (Be prepared to eat noodles for breakfast.)*
- *Allow them to listen to their bodies and respect their inner voice. That voice needs to be trusted, especially where their bodies are concerned.*