

Managing Mealtime Behaviors



Mealtimes should be enjoyable family times. The meal situation can also be a learning time. Parents should use this time to teach their children how they are to behave when they have company, when they eat out in public, or at regular meals at home with the family. Parents should expect their children to behave in a similar manner at all meals. Appropriate behavior at mealtimes is an acquired skill. Parents should not expect their children to know how to behave without being taught. One good way for parents to teach their children how to behave at mealtimes is to model good behavior. Remember that children often emulate their parents in many situations.

Parents should establish a set of mealtime rules for their children. For example:

1. Children must stay seated in their high chair (if they're younger) or in a chair at the table (if they're older) throughout the meal.
2. Throwing food is not allowed.
3. Children must keep their mouths closed while chewing.

Parents should tell their children the rules at every meal until they follow them consistently. They should then review the rules occasionally. Parents should clearly state what will happen if misbehavior occurs (e.g., "If you throw food, then . . .").

Parents should make mealtimes pleasant times for their children. Unpleasant things that occurred during the day should not be discussed. Parents should focus on positive interactions. They should also include all children in the conversation. Parents can, for example, discuss what their children did that day. Parents should praise appropriate behaviors (sitting quietly, talking) throughout the meal. Parents should always pay attention to good behavior and good manners

throughout the meal whenever possible.

Parents should give their children only small portions of food that they are sure can be eaten. Parents can always give their children more if they ask for more of any one item. Parents should try to serve a variety of foods.

Parents should offer dessert to children only if they finished their meal. Parents should also try to limit snacks, and should offer them only if the last meal was finished.

Parents should set a reasonable time limit for meals: For example, thirty minutes for meals; fifteen minutes for snacks. Parents can use a portable kitchen timer to indicate when the meal is over, if this becomes a problem. When the bell rings, the table should be cleared regardless of whether the children are finished. Parents should not say anything to their children if they don't finish on time. Once meals are finished on time for 1-2 weeks, parents can stop using the timer.

Behavioral Problems: Some Reminders

***Ignore tantrums.** Parents should not pay attention to their children if they start saying, "no" or crying, or throwing a tantrum.



***Do not allow food to be thrown.** If a child begins to throw food, parents should immediately remove his or her plate. **DO NOT TALK TO HIM OR HER.** After two minutes (if he or she is quiet) parents should replace the plate and tell the child it is time to eat.

***Use time out.** If any other mealtime rule is broken, parents should remove the child who broke the rule from the table and place him or her in a brief time-out. If there are three time outs during any one meal, parents should end the meal for that child. If parents do have to terminate a meal, they should do it matter-of-factly. They should not nag or scold. There should be no snacks given until after the next meal (only water).

***Appropriate seating.** All meals should be eaten in a high chair, booster chair, or regular chair, depending on the size of the

children, including snacks. Parents should not allow toys to be brought to meals. They can be left where children can see them.

***Avoid distractions.** Parents should turn off the television and/or radio until mealtime is over. This will minimize distractions.

Discourage bottle feedings. Parents should discourage bottles during and between meals for younger children. All liquids should be taken in a small cup. Bottles can be given at designated times. If children are beginning to take a cup, this should be encouraged or introduced at the appropriate time. If children are using the bottle to help them fall asleep, parents should explore other ways to soothe them (for example, music, a soft toy, a blanket or a mobile).

***Discourage between meal snacking.** Parents should not allow their children to have access to foods between meals that may decrease their appetite. All food children eat should be as nutritious as possible. Parents should encourage their children to eat finger foods and snacks such as fresh fruit, dried fruits, fruit juices, cheese, crackers, peanut butter sandwiches, etc. Parents

should be careful of foods that are easily choked on, such as popcorn and raisins. These foods should not be given to children until they are older.



*Center for Effective Parenting
Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580
NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166*

www.parenting-ed.org