

Mealtime Routines for Children

Meal times are an important part of child development. Meal times are more than just feeding your child; they are a chance to learn socialization, healthy eating habits, independence, and table manners.

Routines not only make life easier, kids thrive on them. Mealtimes are no exception. Having a routine in place for mealtimes is beneficial for both you and your children. And, implementing such routines is easier than you may think.

- Before it is time for a meal, you may want to give a five minutes warning, so that your child can wrap up whatever he/she is doing and still have time to get to the table. This can help avoid mealtime battles, if your child is in the middle of an activity and does not want to stop.
- Also, before meals, you may want to implement tasks such as setting the table. Once your child has washed his/her hands, they can set out napkins, utensils, etc. This allows them to feel more engaged about the mealtime, and it will be less work for you.
- During the mealtime, sit with your children, and interact with them. Talk about the food you are eating. Help the children learn to serve themselves. Take the chance to introduce table manners. All of these actions help children learn how to socialize during the mealtime. You set the tone for the entire meal. If you are rushed and stressed about the meal, the children will feel the same way. Encourage healthy eating habits and manners by modeling them for your children.

Here are some quick tips to start making meal times a more positive experience:

- **Serve children appealing foods.** Think about the texture, color, and temperature of the foods. Try to offer a variety of colors to make the meal more interesting. Serve familiar foods along with something new. Depending on what food you prepare, there may be tasks that your child can do to help make the family meal. Even if you don't ask that your child help each day, you could make it a weekly part of the routine (e.g., each Monday evening, he/she helps make dinner). Getting kids to help in the kitchen teaches them how to cook and also helps them to appreciate the time and effort that goes into preparing meals.
- **Let children lead.** Remember – you set the mealtime scene and offer healthy foods. Children should have the freedom to choose what they eat and how much. Do not buy into the clean plate club. Children are very good at self-regulating how much food they need. However, you can encourage them to try new foods. During meals, it should be an established routine to try at least one bite of everything. Children should learn to stay at the table until everyone has finished eating or ask to be excused.
- **After the meal is over.** It is a good idea to require that your child takes his own dishes to the sink and pushing in his chair when he leaves the table. Elementary age children are ready to take on more responsibility and help with after-dinner clean-up.
- **Start small.** Changing the way you serve your meals can be scary, but start small. Perhaps you begin by starting a routine before the meal, or just have the children serve themselves the fruit or vegetable. You do not have to change everything overnight. Set goals and slowly integrate a positive, family-style dining routine into your day.

To get started on a new or to enforce an established mealtime routine, simply determine the type of mealtime routine you would like. You might want to have a family meeting for this and include your child in the decision-making process. Create a chart that lists all the action items, and then work with your child to start implementing them. Before you know it, you will be well on your way to having family meals that no longer include battles and chaos. In addition, your children will be learning skills that will be helpful, no matter where he /she has their meals.