

Making Time to Connect with Children

SPENDING TIME AT THE DINNER TABLE—a cherished time for connection or a challenge? A grandmother recently asked me what the “follow-through” should be when a young child’s inability to sit for very long at the dinner table makes a relaxed dinner all but impossible. Sometimes her daughter mentions the idea of a “time out,” but doesn’t usually enforce it because she wants to maintain a happy atmosphere. How wise! Sitting still for meal times isn’t just problematic for three-year-olds with short attention spans. How many adults feel pressures mounting up if they sit longer than a few minutes to eat?

Our conversation got me thinking about the ways we “beat ourselves up” for the choices we make about using time in our busy lives. Does there have to be a “right way” to eat dinner or engage in other activities with our children? We value times to connect with our children, dinner time being just one of them, and the key is making them truly enjoyable for everyone.

For working parents who get home at 6:30 in the evening, a prolonged dinner would turn the whole evening routine topsy-turvy. Some families need down time at the end of the day and prefer eating in front of the TV but may feel guilty about it because of the prevailing norms. When I was very young and worked as a nanny in an upper-class home, I fed the children and put them to bed while the married couple had a more civilized meal alone.

A wide variety of perspectives about mealtimes exists within our American culture, and thoughts and practices are always evolving. Years ago my son brought his fiancée to a casual weekday family dinner. She confided in him how uncomfortable she felt that we stayed talking at the table so long. Our dinner seemed strange to her, but now as a mother she puts great effort into weekend family meals.

Families are definitely eating faster. In a 2011 survey of the eating habits of teens, 32 percent of families spent 20 minutes or less eating dinner, compared with 26 percent eating at this pace in 2009. When children and young people have lots of activities and homework, spending leisure time chatting at dinner becomes more challenging. Interesting that in a 2012 review of research in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, each weekly family dinner correlated with a 15 percent reduction in the odds of substance abuse and a reduction in depressive symptoms and delinquency in teenagers.

One of the core benefits of sitting down to eat together is making eye contact and noticing how everyone is doing. The question becomes “How do we make dinner conversation so inviting that everyone wants to stay at the table?” or, if that time of day isn’t possible for everyone, “How can we set up another consistent family time?”

In a September 18 *Wall Street Journal* article called “Does Dinner Count If It’s Really, Really Quick?” reporter Diana Kapp not only reviewed the research on the benefits of eating together but offered tips from families who have worked to make dinner times more rewarding for everyone involved. It’s important to note that in this upbeat article, the old idea of punishing children for their inability to sit properly at dinner has given way to creative ideas like serving fun courses and playing a game at the table.

One wonderful aspect of mealtimes is that they are regular, so children and adults can count on seeing each other and talking directly. The same important benefits occur when we plan consistent times to play with our child or take him on a fun outing. Over the years, I’ve seen again and

again how children de-stress and flourish when they know ahead that they have a time (especially alone time) with mom or dad that they can count on, not shopping or rushing through bedtime routines, but a time when parent and child check in with each other and awaken feelings of closeness and care.

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