

Managing Mealtimes

Mealtimes can be a good time for all the family to meet up, touch base with each other and share their news. Getting together to eat appeals to all ages, for example young children love a tea party or picnic as much as older generations.

It comes as a surprise then, that fewer families are finding the time to eat together. Often meals are taken on the run or in front of the TV and children's eating habits can start to become a problem.

So how do you get your children to eat well and enjoy the food you provide?

First of all have regular mealtimes, and sit down with your children as they eat. They love your company and will behave better when you're around. Resist the temptation to go off and do other jobs while they're busy eating.

Secondly, at mealtimes turn off the TV and stereo so everyone can pay attention to their food. Young children have the difficult job of learning how to chew, use a spoon, and lift a cup without spilling. This takes concentration so the TV or other distractions can make it a lot harder to develop these new skills.

If you can, have meals at a table. Sitting upright is good for digestion. Avoid eating in front of the TV, children can be so involved in their TV program that they don't pay attention to what they've eaten, they may not notice when they're full and this could lead to a pattern of over eating.

When children pick at snacks through the day and then won't eat the meal you've cooked it can be frustrating after the effort you've put in. It can help to set some house rules like limiting snacks to mid morning and mid afternoon so they don't interfere with your child's appetite before a meal.

Keep mealtimes positive, chatting over a meal can bring you closer as a family but stick to pleasant subjects if you can. It's important your

children see food and eating as a healthy way to give them energy and don't link food to very emotional and upsetting subjects.

We all have favourite foods, likes and dislikes so give your children some choice. When you give them a chance to choose between two or three foods at mealtimes they are practicing the important skill of making decisions for themselves. Ask your children to choose, for example, between beans on toast or spaghetti but don't give them open choices such as "What would you like for tea?" or you might find your self dishing up chips every day!

Parents' tips:

Yasmin, mother of Yasar, aged twenty three, Nasar, aged twenty, Miriam, aged nineteen and Mohsin, aged sixteen of Stoke says: " I sit them at the table as a family to eat, it doesn't matter if they make a mess or don't eat much so long as they sit together and eat a bit."

Julie, mother of Megan, aged three and Timmy, aged five, of Endon says: "To get them to eat fruit I chop up oranges, apples and bananas and make them into face shapes on the plate then we all share them."



For more information on First Steps
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