

iBlankie

every parent's security blanket



MELLOW MEALTIMES

INTRODUCTION

For young children, food is love. And the love connection between you, your child, and food is very important. This 13-page article offers words, skills, techniques and strategies to help strengthen your family bond at mealtimes.

The information in this article is expanded upon in [Food and Your Child: Healthy Attitudes and Harmonious Meals](#), a 32-page article offering techniques and strategies to foster your child's healthy food attitudes and to smooth mealtime conflicts. iBlankie also offers [Food Strategies](#), an 13-page article focusing on tips in working with your child on food issues.

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1. HEALTHY FOOD ATTITUDES

Minimize Power Struggles

You can provide healthy options in food choices and family meal opportunities, but you cannot force your child to eat and you cannot force your child to eat certain foods. Power struggles over food are useless and unproductive. Food fights accomplish nothing except conflict. We need to be partnered with our child in helping them eat only when they are hungry and in helping them eat healthy foods.

With the families that I work with, I always say, *“Try NEVER to have power struggles with your child over food.”* If food is love to a young child, we want to be very careful how we interact with our child concerning food. Certainly we need to set appropriate limits concerning unhealthy food choices, but we also need to be thoughtful about our approach to food, food choices, snacks and meals. We need to have family mealtimes as wonderful connecting times for families. At meals we need to make who is at the table more important than what is on the table.

Mealtimes as Family Soutimes

Creating a harmonious mealtime is an important and challenging goal. For today’s busy families, mealtimes are often the only family gathering times. In the best of all possible worlds, parents could provide a nutritious meal and also be relaxed and engaged during that meal. However, in the real world, sometimes the choice is between a semi-healthy dinner that is carry-out or delivery with a less-hassled parent, or a hot nutritious meal prepared by a harried parent. Opt for the semi-healthy dinner, which comes with a side of friendly and calm parent. All parents need permission to take the broad view in terms of balancing nutritional meals and harmonious family together time. Family meals are about family connection.

2. MELLOW BREAKFASTS AND SNACKS

Breakfast

Sometimes people, including children, are not hungry for breakfast. Since most nutritionists say that this is the most important meal of the day, this can be problematic.

For some children, it is the choice of typical breakfast foods that they find uninteresting. If your child is bored by breakfast offerings, think about serving lunch or dinner foods for breakfast. Your child may be interested in a turkey sandwich, a piece of healthy pizza, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, chicken nuggets, soup, roast beef or fish sticks for breakfast; expanding the typical breakfast selections to include all meal options may pique your child's interest.

For some children, they are just not morning people and need some extra time to wake up before eating. If mornings are hectic and your child may not want to eat right away, sometimes packing a car snack can help. Calling breakfast-on-the-go a car snack, a motor meal, a light bite, or a morning munchie may defuse a power struggle with a child that insists they don't want breakfast. Breakfast by any other name is just as healthy and may go down a little easier with your child. You can try packing waffles or fruit slices or oatmeal (you can call it O-on-the-Go) in a Ziploc bag, plastic container or thermos for eating as they play or in the car.

If your child isn't interested in food at home or in the car, be sure that there is a non-perishable snack in their backpack when they are dropped off at childcare or school so that they don't have to wait until lunch. Be sure to ask the caregiver or teacher to check in around 9:30 or 10am to see if your child needs to eat in case the group doesn't have a scheduled snack.

Sometimes preparing for breakfast the night before, by you or by you and your child together, can be helpful. Setting out placemats and cereal bowls and spoons or a waffle iron or jars of peanut butter and jelly can set the stage for a healthy breakfast and save some morning time. Sometimes this can be a planting of the seed for a healthy breakfast, acting like a rehearsal for the morning meal.

Snacks as Mini-Meals

For many children, snacks are as important as meals. Many children are hungrier between meals than at mealtimes. If we are following the important guideline that children eat when they are hungry, then they should eat at mid-morning and mid-afternoon if that's when they are hungry. Nutritional snacks are as important as nutritional meals.

Snacks can be viewed as mini-meals, that is, borrowing from regular meals, rather than as interim food to tide your child over until the next meal. Why not serve half a cheese sandwich for a snack and then the other half at lunch? Why not serve some of the turkey and peas from dinner earlier for their 3pm snack? The nutritional value of snack foods plays a crucial role in your child's overall nutrition.

Your Child's Snack Drawer

The idea of a snack drawer is to have an array of healthy choices that your child can provide for themselves. This certainly encourages autonomy, although you may need to be an open-the-peanut-butter-jar team to provide some help.

Have a drawer in your kitchen that is low enough and easy enough for your child to open on their own; fill this with non-refrigerated nutritional foods that your child likes. Be sure your child will have easy access to the food; for example, for cereal and crackers pre-open the boxes or re-container for easy access. Label this snack drawer with a photo of your child and/or with their name or a picture that they have drawn.

You may want to have your child involved in a grocery shop to fill their own snack drawer or help you make a list of foods. Or you may want to supply the snack drawer yourself—trust your instincts and do what you think will work most smoothly. You may want a separate drawer for each child if you have more than one child or you could do several large plastic containers within one drawer or cabinet.

A snack drawer can also bypass food struggles during mealtimes or snack time. If your child doesn't like what is on the dinner table or what is on the snack plate, then it is easy to respond, *"I see that you are not interested in eating what is set out for dinner/snack. Please feel free to find yourself some food to eat from your snack drawer."* This approach encourages your child's independence and eliminates your needing to provide an alternative food choice.

Your child doesn't have to like or eat what is served, but you don't have to cater to their every food whim. If your child chooses not to eat what is presented, then they need to assume some responsibility for preparing an alternative. For a very young child you may need to provide a good deal of assistance, but hopefully not provide total preparation.

When my children were little, our family had wildly varying food preferences and tastes. Being the overprotective mother that I was—so eager to please and so anxious for my children to eat—for years and years I made four different dinners every night to accommodate everyone's dinner needs. Yes, you could call this "crazy." Boy, do I regret all that—I was so burned out from cooking after my children went to college that I barely cooked a meal for years. And I deprived my children of the opportunity to take responsibility for their own food choices and to prepare some of their own meals. I hope that other parents can benefit from my nuttiness!

Your Child's Refrigerator Shelf

Have a refrigerator shelf low enough for your child to reach, although they may need help opening the refrigerator door. Fill this shelf with nutritious foods that your child can eat. As much as possible, include foods that they can manage themselves. Pre-sliced fruit and vegetables, cheeses, yogurt, or other foods in easy-to-open containers, etc., are good choices.

As with your child's snack drawer, you may want to have your child involved in a grocery shop to fill their Refrigerator Shelf or you may want to provide these yourselves—trust your instincts.

This Refrigerator Shelf is used in the same manner as your child's Snack Drawer as described in the previous section.

3. MELLOW DINNER TIMES: GUIDELINES, PROPS, GAMES & YOUR FAMILY FOOD TEAM

Guidelines for Preserving Your Sanity

GUIDELINE #1:

NOURISH YOURSELF—ON MANY LEVELS—BEFORE YOU FEED YOUR CHILD

You set the emotional tone at mealtimes. It is important for you to feel somewhat relaxed and nourished on an emotional level before you can think about nourishing your child at meals.

On an airplane, during the emergency instructions at the beginning of the trip, the flight attendant talks about parents putting oxygen masks on themselves first and then putting the mask up to their child's face. I've always been glad for that reminder. As a mother, I think to care for my child first. The airplane lesson: only when we have nurtured ourselves first can we provide sustenance for our child.

Along those lines, sometimes I encourage parents to set their alarm clock fifteen minutes before the family usually rises so that they can have some Me Time in the morning and gather themselves before the busy-ness of the day begins. That fifteen minutes can go a long way toward a harmonious family morning and breakfast.

To minimize the conflicts of that Witching Hour from 5-6pm at home, I encourage parents to take some Me Time for ten or fifteen minutes before picking a child up from childcare or school or after leaving work and before coming home to their family.

You can stop for a latte, go to the library for quiet time, park your car a few blocks from childcare or from home, take some deep breaths and listen to music. Even a short amount of time alone can prepare you for the Witching Hour/Arsenic Hour and to family demands and food needs as you arrive home.

*GUIDELINE # 2:
THE BEST DINNER CAN BE THE DINNER YOU DON'T PREPARE*

Give yourself permission not to cook. It is important to remember that what is called the Arsenic Hour or Witching Hour from 5-6pm is often the most challenging family time of the day. Everyone is transitioning from their school and work and is often hungry and hassled, including you. Sometimes the best meal is the meal not prepared. I often encourage parents to plan on frozen dinners—from the grocery or their own meals—or carry-out or delivery several times a week if they can afford it, as this can reserve your remaining energy for connecting with your child rather than preparing the food.

When my children were young, my dinner goal was one home-cooked dinner a week. I designated Friday as the meal that I would do an old-fashioned cooked-from-scratch, meat-and-potatoes-and-veggie meal that I considered super healthy. I could make that happen once a week—it relieved my guilt around other meals that weren't quite as healthy or as homemade or traditional as I liked. As my children got older, this Friday meal also became the one meal per week that children couldn't skip because of playdates or afterschool activities. I loved starting each weekend with wonderful family connecting time over a nourishing homemade meal.

I often suggest that parents have a Friday ritual to start the weekend in an easy way—Friday night as Pizza and Video Night often works. You and your child can take turns choosing which video and which pizza and which dessert. Videos are great because tired parents can semi-sleep through them after a challenging week.

*GUIDELINE # 3:
HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR CHILD*

Lack of Appetite: Children are not always hungry at meal times. It is important for your child to monitor their hunger and then follow their internal barometer telling them to eat or not eat. This is an important learning experience in listening to their body, in respecting their eating rhythm.

Food Choices: In addition, children are not always hungry for the specific food that is set on the table. Should your child be forced to eat the food that is served, especially after you or someone else has spent time, energy, and money to prepare the meal?

It helps to answer this question if we take it to the adult level. If you had brussel sprouts put on your plate and you hated the smell and taste of brussel sprouts, should you, as an adult be forced to eat brussel sprouts? Some think this forcing broadens children's eating selection—would it broaden your food repertoire? Rarely!

If your child doesn't want to eat what is on the table, then they can be given the option of preparing something from their personal Snack Drawer or Refrigerator Food Shelf; a younger child may need some help if this is their choice. *"I see that you aren't interested in the prepared food—would you like to fix yourself something from your Snack Drawer?"* This approach encourages a child's autonomy in helping them get in touch with their food needs, make appropriate food choices, and take responsibility for the consequence of not eating what is on the table. This approach also fosters cooperation between family members rather than power struggles over food.

Serving Size: I have heard doctors say that a person's stomach is the size of their fist. For your child, that fist and the size of their stomach are relatively small compared to an adult's fist and stomach. Most pediatricians say that a serving of food is relative to a child's age, that is, one serving for a child translates to one tablespoon for every year. Using this suggested rule-of-thumb, a serving of applesauce for a one-year-old would be one tablespoon, for a two-year-old would be two tablespoons, etc. It is important to have age-appropriate portions in mind when thinking about your child's food needs and wants. This can avoid power struggles over how much your child eats.

Sitting at the Table: It is also very important to have age-appropriate expectations in terms of focus and activity level at meals. Most two-, three- and four-year-olds have difficulty sitting for longer than several minutes at the table with only food for interest. In addition, no matter what their interest in food, your child—especially your son—may have difficulty sitting for any length of time at meals.

My son was a very active boy. He was always moving his body—he needed to move to learn and to be able to listen. It was fine for me if he stood by the table at mealtimes and ran a matchbox car across his placemat while he ate; sometimes he even ran around the kitchen for a circle or two and then came back to the table. Food didn't hold a lot of interest for him when he was young, but the conversation did—he was engaged in listening and talking and it was wonderful family time. When he became older, at about eight years old, I made a deal with him that he could stand at the dinner table or sit on the kitchen window ledge next to the kitchen table during dinner if he would sit down to eat when we ate at restaurants or at the houses of family or friends. He loved that deal and was always able to sit down to meals when and where it was more socially appropriate.

It is realistic to think that your young child will probably be able to sit down through a meal by the time they are five or six, but this depends often on your child's activity level, the length of the meal, and their level of hunger and tiredness.

Table Manners: Some parents are concerned about teaching table manners from a young age. Family communication and harmony at meals is more important than teaching table manners to young children. Some manners are absorbed from gentle reminders here and there, but most table manners are learned from your modeling the desired behaviors and respect. This modeling is more powerful in a mealtime atmosphere of harmony rather than contention. Focusing on providing positive reinforcement for appropriate eating behavior is far more effective than reminders about inappropriate manners. *"I like the way you keep your mouth closed when you chew"* changes behavior better than *"Keep your elbows off the table."*

Once again, mealtimes are family soultimes. Who is at the table, sharing and listening, is more important than what food is served on the table.

Props

Structuring a family meal time can make things go more smoothly. You can use props to structure conversation and you can use props to change up the usual eating scene and engage your child's interest, especially since food is not always intrinsically interesting to young children.

PROPS FOR STRUCTURING CONVERSATION

Pass around an object to each family member in turn to structure taking turns talking. This can be a Talking Stone or Talking Stick as used in Native American circles, an hourglass sand-timer, or one of those magic wands filled with oil and floating objects. *"If you hold the Talking Stone, it is a Talking Time. For everyone else, it is a Listening Time."*

PROPS FOR TABLE-SITTING

Have some quiet activities and toys available to your child so they can still be present and participate in discussions even when they are not hungry or are finished eating. Matchbox cars, paper and markers, dolls to feed, small animals, coloring books and crayons, playdough, mazes, puzzles, etc., can help keep your child's hands occupied while they focus on the conversation.

PROPS FOR CHANGING THE MEALTIME SCENE

When trying to change up family mealtimes to provide some additional interest and conversation, try appealing to your child's senses and your child's imagination.

- ☑ **Eat by flashlight:** A family-friendly variation on dinner by candlelight. The dimmer light can calm your young child and make your entire dinnertime more peaceful.
- ☑ **Eat with delicious smells:** Our appetites are very linked to our sense of smell. About fifteen minutes prior to eating, try lighting a candle in a safe place far away from your table, a candle that smells like one of your child's favorite foods. Candles are now available in so many different aromas—try cinnamon, orange, apple, ginger or peppermint—that may help stimulate food interest and provide a guessing game "What's that Smell?" at dinner.
- ☑ **Eat with music and songs:** Research has shown that people often eat to the speed of the background music that they are hearing. Play different types of music for different mealtime effects. Play sing-along songs for some family sing-and-eat time.
- ☑ **Have a color-coordinated meal:** Have your child help you plan an all-white meal, an all-brown-meal, a rainbow-colored meal or a patriotic red-white-and-blue meal.
- ☑ **Have an indoor picnic:** Put a plastic tablecloth on the floor and eat there—at least now your baby can't throw things down on the floor! Read *The Winter Picnic* by Robert Welber during dinner.

Games

MOST FAVORITE LEAST FAVORITE GAME

Have everyone take turns talking about the most favorite part of their day and the least favorite part of their day. Keep it short, keep it simple. Follow-up on the previous day's most and least favorite parts when possible.

I SPY

Play the *I Spy* guessing game on specific categories that are present at the meal—foods that are on the table, colors of clothes that are being worn, objects in the room, etc.

OTHER GAMES

The following games can be adapted for table conversation for your child at almost any age: *Grandmother's Attic*, *Mother May I?*, *Twenty Questions*, rhyming games, hide-and-seek in the dining area, and *Where's Waldo?*-type books.

Your Family Food Team

The groundwork of building a Family Food Team can occur with all sharing the kitchen space, with your very young child playing on the floor, and then evolve slowly over time to include your child's help with meal preparation. Your young child can enjoy playing with pots and pans; you can gradually over time add something to their pots and pans that they can stir and slowly, over time, become a Family Food Team helper.

Much family time is spent around meals, preparing food and the table and then cleaning up afterwards. There are many mealtime opportunities that can help strengthen Your Family Food Team. As is age-appropriate, your child can be a food helper in many stages of food planning, preparing, eating, and clean-up. These can be assigned chores or daily tasks as they arise. Structuring these jobs can be fun and can help engage your child's cooperation as part of Your Family Food Team.

Sometimes mealtime helping can be facilitated with a song: a preparing-for-dinner song or a tearing-up-lettuce-for-salad song or a clean-up song, the sillier the better. Food songs are especially fun if you change-up the words from familiar food songs. *Have You Seen the Muffin Man* can become *Have You Seen the Pickle Man?* *I Love to Eat Apples and Bananas* can become *I Love to Eat Mudpies and Bananas*.

FOOD PREP

For most families, meals during the week are hectic and there is the famous pre-dinner Arsenic Hour or Witching Hour when everyone seems to fall apart and have few resources for preparing dinner. This section on food preparation is for those weekday dinners and weekend meals when you realistically have the resources to make meals a family Together Time opportunity.

You can engage your child in food preparation more easily if you think of engaging your child on a sensory level. Certainly you can discuss the sensory aspects of the food you are preparing, but in addition your child will be engaged if you appeal to their tactile sense—most young children love playing with water. You can provide a small tub of water, or put a step stool or chair at the kitchen sink for an older child, and have your child help in the food preparation or clean-up. Your child can wash carrots by hand or, even more fun, with a vegetable scrubber. You can also add some soap to the sink or tub water and have your child wash some of your food prep items—pots and pans and spoons—as you no longer need them.

Your child can also help with food choices—should we cut the carrots into sticks or circles? Should we eat the carrots raw or should we cook them? Should we have apples or applesauce with dinner?

The goal is to involve your child in the food preparation process in whatever way works so that there can be communication and togetherness even before the sit-down meal begins.

I have read many articles about how having your child help prepare food can encourage them to eat those foods. Realistically, both personally and professionally, I don't believe that having a child help in food preparation has any immediate impact on convincing them to try the foods that they prepare. But I do think that the time spent preparing food together can be wonderful bonding time between you and your child, no matter the eating outcome. I think it is important to have the goal be the sharing of the preparation experience rather than your child trying a new food, as you have no control over that and you could be setting yourself up for unrealistic expectations and frustration.

Your child can...

- Wash pots and pans in soapy water at the sink or in a floor-level plastic tub with 1" of water
- Mix and stir food with spoons or hands
- Taste food for seasoning—add the seasoning
- Use a salad spinner
- Add ingredients for smoothies; do the buttons on the blender
- Squeeze a garlic press
- Turn on the blender/food processor buttons with supervision

TABLE PREP

Your child can...

- Spritz the table with water; wipe the table with a sponge
- Make paper place mats and decorate them with markers
- Put out placemats
- Match utensils to place mats (you trace plates and spoons and forks onto a paper placemat and setting the table becomes a matching exercise)
- Make place cards for where people sit, either drawing or printing
- Set out table activities for themselves—matchbox cars, paper and crayons, etc.
- plan the music to play during dinner

FOOD CLEAN-UP

Having a clean-up song, perhaps borrowed from your child's daycare or school, can provide the impetus to have the energy for meal clean-up be a family effort. Having a big trash can nearby ("*Two points for throwing the napkins in the trashcan!*") and some soapy water in the sink for dirty dishes can make clean-up a quick chore.

After meals When my children were growing up it seemed that everyone left the kitchen and I would be the Lone Ranger doing clean-up. After much frustration, I finally made a dinner rule: "*No one leaves the kitchen until everyone leaves the kitchen.*" That way I wasn't left alone with kitchen duty. This meant that everyone would scurry around helping as quickly as possible so that they could get on to their next activity. This rule made me the Wicked Witch of the West, but at least it made me a WW of the W who wasn't so frustrated!

Your child can...

- Throw out their own napkin
- Put their own dish and glass in the sink
- Spoon leftover food into a container
- Wash dishes in soapy tub of water or sink
- Wipe the table with a sponge
- Sweep the floor with a broom; hold the dustpan
- Use a dustbuster on the chairs and floor

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For young children, food is love. And the love connection between you, your child, and food is very important. This 13-page article offered words, skills, techniques and strategies to help strengthen your family bond at mealtimes.

May this article help your family have mellow mealtimes!

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