

Skill-Building Opportunities

Sitting for Family Meals

Question: My three-year-old has a hard time sitting at the table for meals with the family. She'd rather go off and play on her own. How can we keep her interested in sharing meals with the rest of the family?

Family meals are the stuff of legends: of family memories passed down through generations, to hilarious comedies and horror films. Everyone, though, seems to agree that mealtime can be the best time for family bonding. There are many strategies you can use to help your daughter sit with the family during meals and encourage her involvement in learning at the same time by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing, It is the skill of determining what you want to communicate and realizing how communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

1

Wait until the meal is ready before bringing young children to the table.

Children tend to have more patience for family meals if they haven't spent a long time waiting for it.

2

Create positive routines.

Create traditions that everyone enjoys, such as each person sharing a memory from the day. Change the questions for sharing: the funniest thing that happened today, the most surprising thing, the most exciting thing, etc.

3

Involve everyone in the conversation.

Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues taped family mealtimes and playtimes to determine how these experiences are linked with children's competencies in language, literacy and the skill of Communicating later on. She found that conversations and the use of language make a big difference in how well children learn.

Your child will probably want to stay at the table if the conversation involves her. The most effective conversations go on for more than a few sentences and engage children by asking them to think about what the family is discussing.

- "Why do you think that happened?"
- "What do you think will happen next?"

Ask your child to talk about her experiences and to tell stories about her own life.

4

Use rich and diverse language and ask questions in engaging back and forth conversations.

Another key finding from Snow's research is that some families have wonderfully interesting conversations that include rich and diverse language, even when children don't understand every word the adults are using. So, just by hearing your conversations, children are learning.

5

Play games at mealtime.

Word games also promote Communicating skills. For example:

- Play guessing games with the first letters of words. Ask, "How many foods can we think of that start with the letter?" All family members can take turns giving answers.
- Word of the day. Ask family members to find a new word to share with the rest of the family.
- Rhyming games. Ask the youngest child at the table to say a word. Then each family member goes around the table saying a word that rhymes with it until no one can think of any more.
- Play tongue twisters. Use traditional tongue twisters such as, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" or create your own. For example, have your child name one food on the table. The next person would repeat the word and add another word that starts with the same sound (e.g., "milk, meatball") continuing around the table.

6

Elaborate.

Use the following strategies to keep the conversation going with your daughter:

- Discuss past experience in rich detail;
- Ask lots of open-ended questions or "wh" questions: why, what, where, or who;
- Repeat what she says, thus encouraging her to say more;
- Provide more feedback as the conversation goes back and forth; and
- Show a genuine interest in what she's saying.

7

Share your own stories.

Mealtimes are a great time to share your own stories with your daughter. When you talk with her about your childhood and family history, you are passing down traditions and memories that will bind your family together.