



IN ORDER TO FUNCTION WELL IN LIFE, our basic human needs, including eating, must be met. Yet mealtime is more than just food consumption. It is a time to be social with others and to develop lifelong health habits and manners.

The following tips are from pediatric occupational therapy practitioners who have experience with educating parents on establishing mealtime routines.

If you want to:

Consider these activity tips:

Avoid meltdowns.

Because children of all ages benefit from routines, have meals and snacks at the same time each day. If a meal time is going to change, let children know ahead of time. This preparation can help to avoid behavior issues that may occur when the child faces unexpected change. You can anticipate your child's needs when visiting family friendly restaurants. Bring a small toy to keep your child busy, such as crayons and paper; bring a light snack like Cheerios so your child doesn't get too hungry; and ask the waitress to bring the child's food as soon as possible. Avoid crowded times when service is slow, and plan visits around your child's naptime to avoid outbursts.

Increase participation and responsibility.

Meal planning can be fun for children and help them learn daily skills. Involve children in preparing meals whenever possible—be creative. Even giving small children a pan and a wooden spoon to bang on will help them feel involved. Activities involved in preparing meals may include:

- Food shopping. Ask your child to help to pick out items at the store needed for an upcoming meal. Older children can help calculate food costs and read labels for nutritional content.
- Setting the table
- Getting items needed for mealtime, like salad dressing from the refrigerator
- Carrying napkins or plates to the table
- Cleaning up. Your child learns sequencing and responsibility when asked to help wipe the table with a spritz bottle and cloth.

Promote healthy habits.

Mealtimes sitting at a table with no TV on or electronics can send the message that mealtimes are for eating and talking. Distracted eating may encourage overeating and decreases socialization because the focus is not on the family members or the meal itself. Giving children assigned seats at the table with a place mat can help them identify their space for eating. Encourage each child to take one bite of a new food, and remember that it will probably take several tries before the food will be accepted or liked. The expectation to try new things will help children learn to do this on their own and will encourage a balanced diet.

If you want to:

Consider these activity tips:

Develop cooperation and socialization.

Serving food family style allows children to develop communication skills, social skills, and fine motor skills by passing the plate and requesting what they want to eat. Caregivers can role model and use manners to help children learn how to behave at mealtime. Engage everyone at the table in a ritual of gratitude, whether it is a prayer or an opportunity to talk about the day. This turn-taking activity helps children learn the social aspects of eating and prepares them for interactions in the school cafeteria.

Promote positive behavior.

If a child does not behave appropriately at mealtime, asking the child to leave the table until the behavior improves is appropriate. Role modeling and praising positive behaviors also helps.

Need More Information?

Pediatric occupational therapy practitioners promote participation of all children and their families in everyday activities (or occupations), including mealtime routines. When there is a particular area of concern, the occupational therapy practitioner can create an individualized strategy based on the child, and family-specific needs. A series of tip sheets for families is available through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

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Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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