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Dear Parents of Young Children – Mealtime Happy or Hectic?

Michigan State University Extension Service

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Dear Parents of young children

Mealtime—Happy or Hectic?

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

"WHY CAN'T SHE eat like that when she's home!" you may have said to yourself. This seems to suggest that mealtime with little children has its "ups" and "downs."

Some of the "downs" are those times when mealtime seems to be mostly spilled milk, untouched food, interruptions, and confusion. But, on occasions, children eat surprisingly well; they come to the table eagerly, they handle their utensils skillfully, they cause little resistance or commotion.

Or just as you have all but given up, her grandparents may return 3-year-old Mary from a visit with the news that "she ate like a little lady."

Rare occasions of this kind cause you to take heart and say to yourself: "Perhaps Mary is growing up after all and learning how to eat." And what's more, you hope, getting to the point where she enjoys eating.

What things concern parents in this matter of eating? Some say:

"Little Suzy doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive."

"I have to give so much attention to the children that I scarcely know what I'm eating."

"What can I plan that will be good for Suzy and, at the same time, suit the rest of the family?"

To try to answer these questions for your own family is a real job. But here are suggestions that should help to make mealtime go a little smoother.

"It's Time for Dinner"

• Sometimes children get upset before they come to the table. When you call them for dinner, do you take into

account what they are doing at that moment? A little warning that it will soon be time to wash will not snatch them too quickly away from their play.

A short story before mealtime or a quiet TV program is a good beginning for a pleasant meal. (Dads, if you are able to take over at this time of day, it will be a big help to mother just as she is trying to put the finishing touches on the meal.)

To reduce those times when Suzy comes to the table hungry and upset because of a late meal, try to serve meals as much as you can at a regular time. Children, like plants and animals, thrive on regularity in nourishment. If the meal must be delayed too long you might feed Suzy in the kitchen as soon as the main part of the meal is ready. Then let her join the family for dessert.

Make Mealtime Pleasant

To do this, stop and consider—what is the general tone in your home at mealtime? Do you, as parents, lay aside your cares for the day—at least until you have all had a chance to eat? One couple reports that they relax in the living room with a cup of coffee just before dining.

Whatever method you choose, it is well to come to the table in a relaxed and expectant frame of mind. In this way, mealtime becomes a pleasant interlude in the day in which food is more appetizing and enjoyable. A smile is a good way to communicate this feeling to little children.

Some families have rules which govern table talk—no scolding, no fault finding, no problems—all these can wait, and in waiting they may become less important.

Appetites Vary

• That children will eat when they are hungry is a fairly safe theory to keep in mind. Urging children to eat when they are not hungry only makes them resist more. Children's appetites vary greatly from day to day, both as to how much they eat and what they eat.

It isn't easy to sit by and watch children turn down food that you know they need for a balanced diet. Try to keep in mind that they do not need all of these ingredients in 1 day or even in several days.

Mothers are sometimes disturbed when children tire of cooked cereal. But other kinds of cereals such as breads and crackers may serve just as well if they are whole-grained or enriched products.

Children sometimes are not hungry because they nibble between meals. Children vary in this respect—some can wait until mealtime, while others seem to require food more often. If they can get along without nibbling, it is better not to encourage it.

A mid-morning or mid-afternoon snack is to be desired over constant nibbling. It might be a glass of milk or juice. More vigorous appetites could probably use a peanut butter sandwich. Encourage children to sit down for a snack: this is not only good practice but gives them a little rest.

Messiness

Try to keep in mind that messiness in learning to eat is temporary. During this time it is well to provide easy-to-wash table and floor coverings and dishes that can withstand damage.



Slit down for a snack.

There will be less spilling of milk if a fairly small cup is used—one which the child can easily grasp. Fill the cup about half full. There is less to spill and the child can have the fun of asking for more. He may like to pour his own, with help if needed.

The following menus are samples of some points to keep in mind when planning meals for little children.

Keep Meals Simple

● Now that children are allowed to eat more kinds of foods, it is not necessary to plan a special menu for them and another for the family. Planning a family meal that is simple will be good for the children and better nutritionally for the whole family.

Fresh Fruit Cup
Salmon Loaf Baked Stuffed Potatoes
Buttered Green Beans
Bread and Butter Milk
Ice Cream

Improve Food Cookery

In the menu below, even so common a food as ground beef can be made more appetizing by the way it is prepared. If the meat is handled very lightly before cooking, the hamburger will be juicier and taste better.

Beef Burgers DeLuxo with
Lettuce and Tomato
Mixed Raw Vegetable Relishes
(Carrots, Cauliflower, Celery)
Apple Crisp
Milk

Introduce New Foods Gradually

Combining a new food in a sandwich is one way of introducing a new food.

(Try Chopped Apple and Peanut Butter or Cottage Cheese and Ground Dried Apricot or Peach.)

Cut the sandwich small and vary the shape occasionally for added interest.

Finger foods may be more appealing to children if a plate is passed to them which permits some choice.

(Stuffed celery, dried prunes, raisins or dates, crisp raw cauliflower, carrot and green pepper strips.)

Serve small amounts at first and in general keep servings small. Don't judge their capacity by your own.

Adapt Family Menu to Children

You may wish to serve a heavier dessert than is good for the children. You can scoop the fruit from an apple pie and serve it to them. A wholesome dessert can be eaten at any time during the meal rather than exaggerating its importance by expecting the child to wait for it.

Creamed Chicken on Biscuits
Baked Sweet Potato Buttered Peas
Biscuits Jam
Apple Pie Milk



Give children finger foods.

Serve a Variety of Foods

For planning variety in foods, keep a good cookbook with menus handy. Referring to it often will help you use more imagination in your meal-planning. This will not only add variety but be more apt to insure good nutrition.

Meat Loaf with Tomato Sauce
Escalloped Potatoes Buttered Broccoli
Tossed Vegetable Salad
Rolls-Butter Milk
Fresh Applesauce

This letter suggests that:

What you do and say at the table must be as carefully planned as what you eat.

Samuel N. Backus

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Instead of chopping up that large sturdy limb that you just cut from a tree, trim it and place it on the ground in the corner of your yard. Johnny will love to climb on it and imagine that he is high up in an airplane or straddling a horse's back.

A ladder securely supported horizontally about 1 foot off the ground is fun for climbing.

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