



Strong Families Eat Together

What Are Kids Learning at the Dinner Table?

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Kids learn life lessons during meals

When kids sit at the family dinner table, children do more than eat. They also observe and absorb.

“They learn by watching adults using such skills as table manners, conversation, sharing, and making healthful food choices,” according to Elaine Bowen, a specialist with West Virginia University Extension Service’s Families and Health Programs.

Learning to share, take turns, and socialize builds youths’ self-confidence and self-esteem.

Kids copy good and bad examples!

Parents and other adults have to remember that children are always learning. That’s true whether the adults are:

- directly and purposefully instructing children.
- using appropriate behavior.
- exhibiting inappropriate behavior.

Manners, for example, are an important life skill learned only by sitting and observing and by being instructed. If children see appropriate behavior, they will mirror that behavior.

Children also can learn healthy eating habits at the dinner table from Mom and Dad. If parents eat healthy foods in front of their family, their children are more likely to select and eat healthy foods also. Younger children especially will mimic Dad and Mom and will try food they see Mom and Dad eat.

Unfortunately, the same mirror works for inappropriate behavior. WVU Extension educators remind parents and other adults that they must demonstrate the behavior they want children to learn.

For example, if a parent has a dislike for a certain food, Extension educators caution, he or she should not express that feeling in front of their children. If Mom or Dad doesn’t like the food, their youngsters may make the same decision – without even giving the food a fair taste test.

Use mealtime for sharing family happenings

During meals children can learn what is going on in the day-to-day life of their family. Dinner time, for example, can be the time to share with each other the highlights of the day. Children learn to communicate in a positive way when they talk about ideas, plans, and events with members of their family.

Conversation starters are a great tool to help kids express ideas and share feelings.

For Younger Children

- Asking young children to name the colors of food they are being served is a good way to teach them colors.
- Including simple counting in the “what’s on the table” conversation with young children is an easy way to keep them involved.

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- Inviting children to name the foods on the table and to explain where the different foods came from can open new doors to conversations.

For Older Children

- Talk about farms and food production. Eating food together provides “teachable moments,” when parents can help children understand that food does not just appear on the grocery store shelf.
- Also, enjoying a meal together is a great time to plan the next meal. Family mealtime offers opportunities for children to help plan and prepare food.

Extension educators urge parents to consciously work to keep their family mealtime alive and healthy. With a little reflection, parents can discover many ways their family dinner table can continuously be a place where their children benefit from positive learning experiences and skill-building opportunities.

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Call WVU Extension Service Families and Health Programs at 304-293-2796.

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