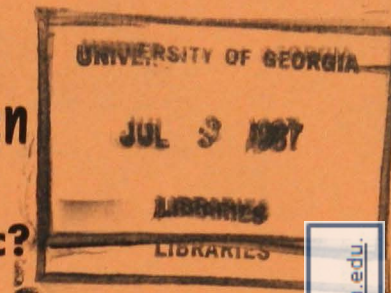


For Parents of young children

Mealtime—Happy or Hectic?



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

"Why can't she eat like that when she's home?" you ask yourself. Every mother knows that mealtime with little children has many 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 occasion, children eat surprisingly well. They come to the table eagerly, handle their utensils skillfully, offer no resistance, and cause little commotion.

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

Rare occasions like that make you take heart and tell yourself that perhaps Mary is growing up after all and is learning how to eat. And what's more, you hope, she's learning to enjoy eating.

Mothers' comments indicate some of the problems they have:

"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."

"It's hard to always serve what will be nutritious for Suzy and still suit the rest of the family."

Solving these problems for your own family is a real job. But here are some suggestions that should make mealtime go a little smoother.

"It's Time for Dinner"

Sometimes children get upset before they come to the table. When you call your child to the table, take into account what he is doing at that moment. Warn him a few minutes ahead of time that it soon will be time to eat. Then you won't risk snatching him from his play too quickly.

Reading your child a story or having him watch a quiet TV program before

mealtime is a good way to prepare him for a pleasant meal. Dads, if you can take charge of the children before dinner, it will be a big help to Mother.

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

Make Mealtime Pleasant

Children are exceedingly sensitive to the emotional climate of mealtime. Even an adult finds his appetite ruined if he tries to eat while angry, worried, or disturbed. Similarly, when your child is tense or unhappy, he will not and maybe cannot eat.

How can you make mealtime pleasant? Stop and consider what the general tone around your house is like at mealtime. Do you make an effort to lay aside your cares for the day until everyone has eaten?

Mealtime occasionally is rushed. Setting aside a few minutes for relaxation before a meal is a good way to see that your family comes to the table in a relaxed and expectant frame of mind. Then mealtime can be a pleasant interlude in the day and food will seem more appetizing to your family. A smile is a good way to convey these feelings to little children.

Some families have table rules such as no scolding, no fault finding, no problem discussion while the family is eating. Such rules might help make your family's mealtimes more pleasant too.

Don't overstress table manners with young children—accidents will happen. Just ask yourself how you would react

if a guest had the same accident. Don't your children deserve equal respect and consideration?

Appetites Vary

Usually, children will eat when they are hungry. Urging them 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. Because children have varying food needs at different times in their lives, their appetites also vary. They grow at various rates and may not need the quantity of food you think they need. Most children triple their weight from birth to 1 year. Their food needs are high during this period. But after a child reaches 2, he grows slowly until he is about 9. Let your child gage his own eating. Give him small servings, and then let him decide how much he can eat.

Mothers sometimes are disturbed when their children tire of certain foods. Substituting other foods with similar nutritive value is one solution to this problem. For example, if Suzy is no longer interested in eating cooked cereal, dry cereals or breads will do just as well if they are whole grain, enriched, or restored products.

Children sometimes are not hungry because they nibble between meals. Children vary in this respect—some can wait until mealtime, others seem to require food often. Giving your child a mid-morning or midafternoon snack is better than letting him nibble constantly. Remember that snacks are as much a part of your youngster's diet as meals. So provide snacks that are nutritious as well as liked by your child. A snack might be a glass of milk or juice. If your child has a vigorous appetite, he probably can eat a peanut butter sandwich. Encourage your child to sit down while



Have your child sit down for snacks.

he eats his snack. It will establish a good habit as well as give him a little rest.

Messiness

Try to keep in mind that a small child's messiness in eating is temporary. He will become neater as his muscular coordination improves. However, you're wise to provide easy-to-wash table and floor coverings and dishes that can withstand damage when your child is small.

Providing your child with comfortable and convenient seating at the table may also eliminate some messiness. If he sits too high at the table, the distance from his plate to his mouth increases and adds to the possibility of his dropping or spilling food. If he sits too low, he will be awkward and won't be able to use his utensils easily. Seating him too far away from the table will make him tired and messy.

Seeing that your child has eating utensils suited to his ability also will prevent some mealtime messiness. Suzy probably will spill less milk if you give her a glass that fits her hand and one that she can handle easily. A heavy bot-tomed cup or glass will resist tipping, and dishes with sides will help your child learn how to get food on his fork.

Another way to reduce messiness at mealtime is to place your child's utensils and food where they are convenient for him. A child is most likely to set his glass at the lower right side of his plate after he takes a drink. Help him place it higher so he can't knock it over so easily. Also, pass food to your child so he can take what he wants or set the dishes where he can reach them.

Keep these points in mind when you plan meals for little children.

Follow the Daily Food Guide

The Daily Food Guide includes foods everyone should eat each day—milk, meat, vegetables and fruit, and bread and cereal. Each of your family members needs varying amounts of food. Of course, small children need smaller quantities of food than adults need. But all family members, including children, need a variety of foods to insure good nutrition.

Plan Colorful and Attractive Meals

Children notice color in meals. Colorful foods such as fruit gelatin often are popular with them. You may improve your child's eating by serving him foods of various shapes arranged in interesting ways.

Children do not like foods mixed together as well as they like them served separately. Your child may be as old as 8 or 9 before he really likes "one dish" meals. Some children eat the entire serving of one food before they taste another. So serve small portions of food and separate them carefully to make meals more attractive to your child.

Be Aware of Your Child's Sensitivity to:

Temperature—Children like food warm—not hot or cold. The range of temperatures acceptable to them is narrower than the range for adults. Since the consistency of some foods (cooked cereals or creamed mixtures) is affected by temperature, make sure that such foods have the right consistency at the temperature your child likes them.

Flavor—Children like sweet tastes, but they prefer that other flavors be mild, especially the sour and bitter ones. Their taste buds are more sensitive than those of adults. Children also prefer mildly seasoned foods rather than highly seasoned, strong flavored foods.

Texture—Children like foods they can chew easily. Johnny may prefer hamburger, hot dogs, bologna, and tuna-fish to steaks and chops until he develops skill in chewing. Stringiness in beans, scum on cocoa, and seeds in tomatoes or berries may be distasteful to your child. Remember that children like variety in texture also.

Introduce New Foods Gradually

Every new food you introduce to your child presents him with a new experience in taste, texture, or temperature. He is most likely to accept new foods if you give them to him one at a time and serve them the first time with foods he likes best. Don't be concerned if he dislikes a new food the first time he eats it.



Give your child finger foods.

It may take him a long time to learn to like some foods. Serve him small amounts at first and, in general, keep his servings small. Don't judge your child's capacity by your own—he needs only a fraction of an adult serving.

Remember

Children are mimics—they do what they see others do. So if Daddy doesn't drink milk or eat carrots, neither will Johnny. Small children are natural followers, so a good way to help your child develop good food habits is to have all your family members eat their meals rather automatically, without commenting on their likes and dislikes. What you do and say at the table must be as carefully planned as what you eat.

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You can purchase paperback editions of the following books at most drug and grocery stores.

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◇ Spock, Benjamin. *Dr. Spock Talks with Mothers*. Crest Books. 1964. See "The Poor Eater," pp. 138-43.

◇ Spock, Benjamin and Miriam Lowenberg. *Feeding Your Child and Baby*. Pocket Books, Inc. 1955.

Do you have questions about your children that you'd like answered in this newsletter? Are there topics you'd particularly like to see discussed in it?

Please address your questions and suggestions to your county home agent and she will transfer them to the editor.

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