

What is Your Food-Related Behavior?

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Mealtime with the children can be a nice family time, a bit stressful, or a complete disaster. Everyone at the table plays a role in how the meal will go. We should reflect on what we do when we are feeding and interacting with children at mealtime. The following statements should stimulate thought:

- I involve children when preparing food for meals and snacks.
- I have children help in the set-up and clean-up of meals or snacks.
- I sit with children during meals and snacks.
- At meals and snacks, I eat the same food as the children.
- I try to serve new foods like a new vegetable or try a different preparation method.
- I encourage children to taste all foods offered, but I do not make them.
- I give children the opportunity to serve themselves at mealtime.
- I talk about nutrition at mealtime.
- I try to make mealtime low key by ignoring negative behavior.
- I read stories to children about food and nutrition.
- I have taste-testing activities so children can try different foods.

If you can answer “often” to these statements, you are probably on the correct track to happier, healthier, mealtimes. If you answer “seldom or never” to these, it might be a good idea to review mealtime behavior. A few changes by the adults could create a better atmosphere for everyone.

Consequently, we are finding that the following food-related behaviors are not considered a good way to promote happy, healthy meals:

- Using food as treats to reward children for good behavior.

- Encouraging the child to taste the food by promising dessert.
- Rewarding or praising children when they eat a lot.

Children know when they are full. As adults, we tend to give larger portions than needed. Many have begun this practice, especially in our “super-size” society, and we are training our children the same way. Childhood obesity is fast becoming a major health concern. Parents and care-givers need to be mindful of our tendency to make children eat more than they need or want. One key is to make sure children are not given snacks as a substitute to regular meals. This could cause the child to think that fun snacks will be given if they don’t eat at mealtime. Why eat carrots and peas when you know something more fun will be given later?

Mealtime can be fun, healthy, and a time for the family to get together. Children learn by what they see and hear. If the proper behaviors are followed, everyone benefits. Will this guarantee there will not be problems? Of course not, but it will certainly help the situation. When things begin going in a negative direction, the adult needs to remove the child from the situation. This especially applies to public venues. Most negative mealtime behavior is presented for attention and when the child is removed from an audience, he or she tends to calm down faster.

Mealtime is more than just providing food for hungry people. It is a time to build relationships, educate family members, and create good memories.



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