

A recipe for happy family meals

Let's face it. Eating with young children can be stressful, especially at dinner time. Even though I know the spilling, throwing food, picky eating, and crankiness are all normal they are hard to face each evening. Knowing the many benefits that eating together offers my toddler - from learning more vocabulary to accepting new foods— gives me the push to continue making family dinners a priority in my home.

None-the-less, I recently asked myself how we can make our family mealtimes a happier time. And what a better time to be asking then during Nutrition Month. This year's theme is *Simply Cook and Enjoy*. You may be wondering is the 'enjoy' part even possible when eating with young children? The answer is YES. Over the past month I began carefully practicing what I preach. The following tips really are key.

Ensure the focus for eating together is simply to enjoy each other's company. So much stress is lifted when I let go of being concerned about how much or what my son will eat.

Plan for early dinners. On work nights if dinner is running late I find it helpful to offer my son a light pre-dinner snack to prevent him from becoming over-hungry.

Offer new foods along with familiar, loved foods. By doing this it helps my son feel comfortable at meal times.

Don't let food refusal get under your skin. Once the food is served I remove all emotional investment for the creation of the meal, and focus on my own eating, not my toddler's. It is okay if my son does not want to eat. Coaxing or bribing children to eat certain foods or amounts does not help, in fact it can cause children to eat less and take longer to accept new foods.

Enjoy pleasant conversation. We keep the conversation light and involve our toddler. Interestingly, by doing this it has helped decrease the amount of food that is thrown!

Keep distractions at a minimum. At mealtimes we turn off the TV, cell phones, ipads, and put away toys (or hide them out of site, if needed).

Expect a mess. We keep cloths handy to catch large spills and wait until the meal is over to pick up food that has been dropped on the floor.

Creating happy meal times is worth the effort. These changes have made a huge difference for my family. Give them a try!

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