



redwood
WELLBEING



Tips for Creating a
**Positive Mealtime
Atmosphere**

Five simple ways to support your
child's positive food relationship at
mealtimes.



The environment in which your child eats, affects the way they relate to food and the eating habits they develop and take into adulthood.

Creating a supportive mealtime environment will have a long-lasting positive impact on your child's willingness to enjoy the meal, try new foods, and develop health eating behaviours. It also fosters connection between family members that allow your child to associate meals with peacefulness in their long-term food relationship.

Here are some simple and effective strategies to help you facilitate a positive mealtime atmosphere for your whole family.

connection

The emotional atmosphere of mealtime is critical to a child's ongoing food relationship. Children need regular connection with their primary caregivers, and the meal table offers repeated opportunity to help your child feel loved, valued, and secure in the family.

I acknowledge that there are families that can't come together due to work commitments, extracurricular activities, infant needs and so on, and for these families I recommended you try to find another time in the day/week to have quality time around food, even if it's afternoon tea or breakfast once a week.



Include your child in the preparation and clean-up of meals. Not only does their involvement teach them practical life skills, but it allows for quality time and connection. It is an opportunity to have 1:1 conversation that flows more naturally when a task is being completed. Your child may open up to you more willingly in an organic setting like doing dishes together or chopping vegetables.

Refrain from disciplining the children at mealtime. When you are altogether, it can be chaotic with tired, grumpy kids, and that's completely normal! Don't set high expectations of behaviour at the dinner table but attempt to keep the atmosphere positive even if there are tensions about earlier matters. The family meal is not the appropriate place to air grievances or bring up matters of discipline toward the kids. This takes us back to the first example of keeping a positive emotional atmosphere for your child's long term food relationship.

'By cooking with your kids, you can help them understand that food is a powerful tool in connecting human beings.'
- Lidia Bastianich

Be present. Where possible, try not to be up and down to the kitchen or elsewhere throughout dinner (I know how hard this can sometimes be!) and wait until after the meal is complete to start doing clean up tasks. This is modelling to your child that mealtime with them is the most important thing you can be doing.

Remove distractions. Turn off the TV, move phones away from the table, pause any homework or school/work tasks and be truly present with each other. Create work and friend boundaries where necessary to keep dinner time as family time.

I distinctly remember at least once a week, phone calls during dinner time where my parents would tell the person calling that they would call them back after dinner. I didn't think much of it at the time, but in hindsight it helped me to view mealtimes as quality family time that took precedence.

play

Incorporating play into mealtimes doesn't have to be costly, exhausting, or time consuming. Children might not remember all the fun and playful things that occurred during meals throughout their childhood, but they will remember that meals were a positive experience. Play helps reduce fussiness in eating, and children who feel calm and happy feel more comfortable around new and different foods.

'The fondest memories are made when gathered around the table.'



Examples of ways to bring playfulness into meals include



Telling jokes, stories, and riddles.



Playing word games or games that require no/little equipment.



Asking questions to get to know each other more. You may like to all write 'get to know you' questions on paper and put them in the middle of the table to take turns asking them out loud.



Changing up the meal set up such as eating from 'silly' things like mixing bowls or cups. have 'breakfast' for dinner, offer a 'help yourself' menu of leftovers or easy to prepare foods.

Create a special meal music playlist of the family favourites.



Encourage play with food. Playing with food helps a child to feel less wary of food and more inclined to eat it once they become more familiar with it.



Having an indoor picnic on the floor.



Have breakfast for dinner or switch up meals for a day.



Create a menu together as a family and take turns in role play - chefs, cook, serving each other as waiters and waitresses etc.



routine



Children require routine in their lives to feel security, a sense of safety, stability, and reduced anxiety about the unknown. Mealtime routines are helpful for a child to strengthen trust in consistent opportunities to eat and can support a child to feel relaxed and more in tune with their internal cues.

The way a routine looks for each family will vary; however, it may include:

Offering morning or afternoon tea each day.

Keeping one or two foods the same each time as a 'safe' food option that they are comfortable with.

Dinner is the same environment each night.

You incorporate a set-up/pack up process (E.g hand washing, self-serving from the tables centre, and each child has a role in setting the table, clearing away dishes etc.)

Breakfast is altogether as a family on weekends.

A particular meal that everyone enjoys is cooked the same each time and/or always served on a certain day of the week or month.



agency

Refrain from forcing, bribing, or threatening your child to eat forcing your child to eat everything on their plate. It impacts the emotional atmosphere of the meal and moves your child further away from their intuitive eating internal cues. Rather, allow them to decide on what they choose and how much they eat.

Research studies conducted on pressuring children to eat at mealtimes found counterproductive effects on food intake. In one study, pre-schoolers who were not pressured to eat consumed significantly more food than pre-schoolers pressured to eat. They also made overwhelmingly fewer negative comments about food in general. This data supports previous correlational research indicating that pressure can have negative effects on children's responses to, and intake of food*.

Allow self-service of food if/when possible: This encourages intuitive eating for your children as they will know what and how much they want to eat. You still get to decide what foods are on offer and when.

Galloway, A.T., 2006., Finish your soup!: counterproductive effects of pressuring children to eat on intake and affect.

boundaries



Supportive boundaries are a necessary part of a positive mealtime environment and influence a child's positive long term food relationship. Boundaries modelled in an authoritative manner will not only help your child understand how to have a balanced food relationship, but it will help them to develop their own supportive boundaries with food into adulthood.

Everyday we are putting food boundaries in place for our kids, and when we pair a boundary with a choice, we are still supporting our child's sense of agency as mentioned above. Pairing boundaries and choices will help your child maintain their strong eating intuition while learning what it means to make supportive nutrition choices.

Examples of pairing boundaries and choices include

'I know you would like a smoothie for breakfast. Your options for breakfast are eggs on toast or muesli and yogurt. If you're still hungry for more breakfast afterward we can make you a smoothie.'

'We wont be having ice cream after dinner tonight. IF you would like to eat something after dinner we can make berry chia pudding or cheese and crackers.'

'That's all the crackers on offer today. There will be more crackers again soon. Here's three other snacks you can choose from for morning tea.'

'I know you don't like the veggies. But I would like you to still put some on your plate. I won't be making you a different dinner but you can eat more of the beef or rice if you are still hungry.'

You're doing a wonderful job supporting your child's food positive food relationship, and I hope you find these tips useful in continuing to lovingly get alongside them in their health and wellbeing development.

Let me know how you go with them by getting in touch with me via email or socials.

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