

# Avoiding Mealtime Madness

*Professor Matt Sanders*

I sometimes see US television sitcom episodes about getting the family together for the annual Thanksgiving dinner that is so much a part of the American psyche. It's seen as a very important family event — everyone in the one place sharing happy conversation over a table brimming with food.

While we don't have such a tradition here in Australia, the reality is that the nightly family gathering around the dinner table remains an important part of our social fabric. It is an opportunity for family members to share their day's experiences, enjoy each other's company and join in the planning of family activities.

No doubt for some families this will all sound a bit corny and out of touch, especially in light of today's time-pressured existence, replete with televisions, videos, computers, personal stereos and mobile phones. Perhaps a vision of family get-togethers full of disruptions, verbal battles, and endless attempts to actually get everyone to the table would be more appropriate.

The truth is though that quality time spent together remains an essential element of any family, no matter what its makeup or from what generation it stems.

There are many things we can do as parents to encourage our children early on to learn to sit at a table and eat. Taking the time to do this will not only allow mealtimes to be used to strengthen family bonds, it will also help our children develop good eating habits. And good eating habits mean children are much more comfortable eating out with the family or visitors and more likely to develop healthy eating habits as adults.

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Of course it is important to have realistic expectations about a family meal. When preschoolers first begin to eat at a table there are likely to be spills and messes. This isn't misbehaviour, just a simple learning curve. Try to stay calm and look for opportunities to praise your child.

Because young children are also easily distracted and find it hard to sit in one place for a long time, 20 to 30 minutes is a good time limit for a main meal. And because mealtimes need to be interesting, it is unreasonable to impose a Dickensian “no talking at the dinner table” approach. Of course, it is important conversation occurs between mouthfuls of food — some children will happily chat away over dinner and eat nothing.

It is not essential that your child learn to like every dish they are presented with. If your child is encouraged to eat a variety of foods, they will develop preferences for some foods over others, just as adults do, and there's no point in insisting they eat a specific vegetable if they will happily eat something else just as nutritious.

Some of the best ways parents can help avoid mealtimes being stressful actually occur away from the dinner table.

Try and establish a set time and routine for meals so children know when to stop playing and get ready, or when to turn off the television set. Avoid your child snacking within an hour of a scheduled mealtime. And keep a watch on fluid intake as well. A big glass of milk or juice just before dinner can certainly dampen an appetite.

**Parenting Tip:** Some mealtime problems are directly related to the way a parent and child interact at a dinner table. Children may use the refusal to eat as a way of gaining attention. It can become a problem if you are repeatedly manipulated into allowing your child to eat the most meagre portions of their dinner through bargaining and negotiating. It is better to set appropriate consequences for such behaviour, stick to those consequences, and praise your child when they eat an acceptable portion of everything on their plate.

**Find more parenting tips at: [manitoba.ca/triplep](http://manitoba.ca/triplep) or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.**

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