

How to have better dinners with your kids

As a parent, you've probably heard family meals are good for kids, but why exactly? Tap through for the answers and the steps to make dinner less stressful and more enjoyable than you thought possible!



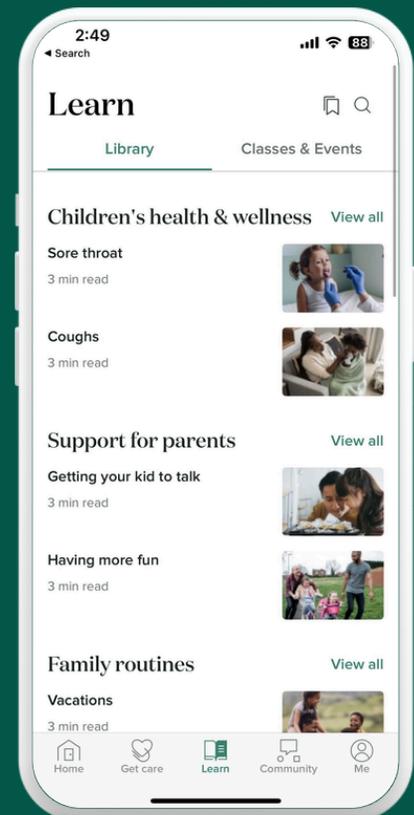
Dinner's big benefits

Check out these top ways eating together nourishes your kid:

- It builds your kid's confidence and self-esteem. When you regularly sit at the table together and listen to their day, you're reinforcing that their words and ideas matter. To encourage conversation, check out our getting your kid to talk topic.
- It provides a stage for kids to practice manners and social-emotional skills, like listening and taking turns.
- Your kid is more likely to try new foods when they see you eating and enjoying them.
- PS: If breakfast is better for your schedule than dinner, make that your family meal! No rule says it has to be dinner.
- PSS: If eating together regularly feels overwhelming, take the pressure off and try again another time. Your kid will still grow up happy.

A routine can help

Creating a routine helps because your child will soon learn what to expect. "First, we put down the placemats, then we put the food on the table, then we eat!" As a result, your kiddo will be less likely to complain about dinner, and that's less stressful for you. It's no fun fielding complaints!



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Here's what you'll need for your routine

To get your dinner routine up and running, you'll need these ingredients:

- **A regular start time:** Without a set time, it's easy to give your kid a snack when they ask for one. Then when dinner's ready an hour later, you wonder why they're picking at their food. Kids need a small snack or meal every three hours, so work backward from when you want to eat dinner to determine their snack time before that.
- **Set-up chores:** Assuming you or your partner is in charge of meal prep, there are still easy ways your kid can take pride in making dinner happen. Toddlers can put placemats and napkins on the table. Preschoolers can pour water into kid cups from a small, plastic pitcher. Big kids can toss the salad with the vegetables you set out. (When it's time for your kids to do these chores, instead of calling out, "dinner," go where they are, get down at their level and announce, "It's time to do our dinner chores.")
- **Clean-up chores:** Just like with getting ready for dinner, if your kid feels you need them for clean-up, you'll get their buy-in faster. Ideas: Load cutlery in the dishwasher, put away condiments, wash or rinse plastic dishes. Be sure to praise them as they do their chore, letting them know how much you appreciate their help.
- **A dessert decision:** Having a set routine for post-meal sweets means kids are less likely to whine for a treat because they know what to expect. The policy is up to you: A small treat every night? A bigger treat, but just on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays? You can ask your kid what'd they'd prefer, too. As long as dessert isn't determined by how much your kid eats for dinner, but is built into your routine like any other step, you're on the right path.
- **Mix these ingredients together:** Once you've set a time and decided on chores and dessert, ask your kid to help you make a visual aid like a poster or chart to outline your family's dinner routine, ideally three to four steps. For kids who aren't old enough to read, draw pictures of the steps.

Add some fun

- Raise your glass for cheers together and say, "This family rocks!"
- Recite a quick blessing or mantra as you turn on a flameless candle. (Candles are bar none at grabbing a little kid's attention and focus!)
- Have everyone share a high and a low for the day, a practice often referred to as "roses and thorns." It's a more creative way to get kids talking than asking, "How was your day?"
- Play "take one thing off the table." One person covers their eyes while everyone else takes one thing off the table (fork, ketchup bottle, napkin). Then the person opens their eyes and has to guess what's missing! (If this game's too distracting, save it for the end of the meal.)
- Share a riddle or knock-knock joke. When you don't know a joke, ask your kid to tell you one they heard at school. (Or ask Alexa!)

Tackle top problems

After you've outlined your dinner routine, it's time to decide how you want to handle issues that can be frustrating to solve. Meals with little kids can be emotional for parents, so be patient with yourself!

Decide on manners

- **Let us guess:** Your big kid prefers to eat with their hands. Your toddler throws food. And everyone has ants in their pants. You're not alone! Teaching your kid good manners can feel like a lost cause.
- **One thing you can know for sure:** Your kid will not be eating steak with their hands when they are 21. (But you can definitely tease them about how they used to do that when they're 21!) With this knowledge in your back pocket, decide how you want to approach teaching manners today.



Some ideas:

- If your kid is chowing down on roasted carrots, but with their hands, maybe you let it go because they're finally eating a veggie. When it comes to the buttered pasta, you insist they use their fork, and simply call out, "Fork!" when they start to use their fingers.
- For the kid who won't sit still, perhaps you call it a win when they can sit still for the first three minutes of the meal. Be sure to give them plenty of labeled praise for that accomplishment each time.
- When your kids interrupt each other or argue, cover up your frustration and say, "I love how you're all talking at the table, and it would be even better if we used our calm voices and waited our turns. Let's try it!"

Decide on screen time

The big benefit your child reaps from family meals is the bonding time with you. When you add a screen to the mix, that quality time is lost.

- For you: Make a point of storing your phone or moving it to another room during dinner. When your kid sees that nothing is more important to you than them at the table, they'll get a shot of confidence and a self-esteem boost.
- For your kid: If your kid currently eats with a screen, you can phase the habit out. After explaining your new routine, set a timer for 7 minutes for your kid to have their screen during dinner for a few days. Then reduce the screen time to 5 minutes and then 3 minutes, until the new family routine is that screens are a reward after being together at the table.



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