



Positive Parenting of Preschoolers

Mealtime Problems

Mealtimes are ideal opportunities for family members to get together and enjoy one another's company. Mealtimes can also be difficult and stressful. Parents may feel that mealtimes have become a 'battle' when children do not eat or behave well. Sitting at a table and eating meals with others is an important skill for all preschoolers to learn. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you make family mealtimes manageable and encourage your preschooler to develop good eating habits.

What Are Common Mealtime Problems?

Children may:

- Refuse to come to the table.
- Leave the table during meals.
- Complain about food.
- Play with food.
- Refuse to feed themselves.
- Not do as they are told.
- Eat very slowly.
- Have tantrums.
- Be fussy about what they eat.

Why Are Children Difficult at Mealtimes?

Preschoolers often find it hard to sit in one place for long periods of time and can be easily distracted. Children are more likely to become restless and disruptive if they find mealtimes too long or boring.

Parents may have unrealistic expectations about what their children should eat and how much they should eat. Preschoolers may like some foods more than others. If children eat a variety of foods, there is no need to insist they eat a food they do not like. Also, appetite can vary from day to day. All children have days when they are not as hungry as usual.

Problems can occur because of the way family mealtimes are organised. Children find it hard to get into a good eating routine if they can eat whenever and wherever they want. Sometimes efforts to manage children's misbehaviour make the problems worse. Extra attention during the mealtime such as coaxing, threatening or reasoning can be an accidental reward for misbehaving or not eating.

How To Establish a Good Mealtime Routine

Have Regular Mealtimes

Set up a daily mealtime routine. It is best to serve three main meals and a morning and afternoon snack at regular times each day. Serve your child an amount that you know



they can finish. Let them ask for more if they eat everything. Explain to your child that they will only be allowed food at these times and cannot help themselves to snacks.

Set a Time Limit for the Meal

It can be helpful to set a time limit for eating. Make the time limit clear to your child. Usually, 20 to 30 minutes is enough. You may like to set a timer to signal when the meal is over.

Explain the Rules

Decide on two or three simple rules for mealtimes and discuss them with your child. After a while your preschooler will be able to say what the rules are. Ideally, rules should tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Here are some examples:

- Sit at the table until you are excused.
- Eat with your spoon or fork.
- Finish your mouthful before you speak.

Tips for Managing Mealtimes

Get Everything Ready

Let your child know that it will soon be time to eat so they can finish what they are doing—*Danny, dinner will be ready soon, you have time for one more game.* To prevent unnecessary waiting, make sure you have everything ready before you call your child to the table.

Seat Your Child at the Table

When the meal is ready, seat your child at the table. Remove any toys or other distractions, for example, turn off the television.

Encourage Appropriate Eating

When your child is eating well and following the mealtime rules, give lots of praise—*You're chewing very nicely with your mouth closed, Charlotte* or *That's the way to hold your fork, well done!* Ask your child questions about their day and encourage conversation between mouthfuls.

Have Realistic Expectations

Learning to sit at a table with others and use eating utensils is a difficult task for preschoolers. There are likely to be spills and messes. Remember that these mistakes are not misbehaviour. Try to stay calm and look for opportunities to praise your child.

Ignore Minor Problem Behaviour

Minor problem behaviour can include whining, eating slowly, complaining about the meal or playing with food. It is best to use planned ignoring for these problems. Continue your meal and do not look at or speak to your child until they stop misbehaving. When you first try this, be prepared for the behaviour you are ignoring to get worse before it gets better. If you ignore the misbehaviour for a while and then react, you will teach your child that they need to continue to misbehave to get a reaction. When your child is eating and behaving well, praise them or involve them in conversation.

If Behaviour You Cannot Ignore Occurs, Tell Your Child What To Do

Getting up and down from the table, fighting with brothers and sisters or throwing food are examples of behaviour that is difficult to ignore. If a problem such as this occurs, immediately tell your child what you want them to stop doing—*Nadia, stop climbing on your chair*—and tell them what to do instead—*sit on your chair please*. Praise your child if they do as you ask.

Use Quiet Time or Time-Out To Back Up Your Instruction

If your child does not cooperate, take them to quiet time. Tell your child what they have done wrong—*You have not done as I asked*—and the consequence—*now go to quiet time*. Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them sit quietly away from the table for a short time. Sit your child on a chair nearby. Tell your child that they must be quiet for two minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, take them to time-out. Say something like—*You are not being quiet in quiet time, now you must go to time-out*. Time-out involves taking

your child to an uninteresting but safe room or space. Tell your child they must be quiet for two minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry.

Return Your Child to the Table

When your child has been quiet for two minutes in quiet time or time-out, return them to the table. Repeat your instruction—*Now please sit on your chair*. Praise your child for doing as you asked. If your child does not do as you ask, return them to quiet time. You may need to repeat this routine a number of times before your child does as you ask.

Ending the Meal

The meal ends when the time limit is up or earlier if everyone has finished eating. At the end of the meal remove the plates from the table even if your child has not finished eating.

After the Meal

Review the Meal

Praise your child's successes—*Kate, you sat at the table all through dinner tonight. Well done*. You may like to reward your child with a special drink or treat. If necessary, briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow and set a goal for the next meal—*Tomorrow let's see if you can remember to eat with your mouth closed*. If your child did not follow your mealtime rules, do not give the reward or any other food until the next regular mealtime.

Key Steps

- Have regular mealtimes.
- Get everything ready before mealtimes.
- Remind your child of the rules for mealtimes.
- Praise and reward your child for eating and behaving well.
- Ignore minor problem behaviour.
- For behaviour you cannot ignore, tell your child what to do.
- Use quiet time or time-out to back up your instruction.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



Written by the Parenting and Family Support Centre (Triple P),
The University of Queensland, Brisbane.

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