

Mealtimes

Sharing meals with the whole family has many positive influences on young children, from good eating habits to sociability, explains **Annette Rawstrone**



Family lives are often busy and eating can easily be reduced to refuelling on the go rather than sitting down and enjoying a meal together. But with a little planning, calm can be brought to mealtimes, along with wide-reaching benefits to the whole family.

SHARED MEALTIMES

Sharing a meal with family or friends is the perfect time to relax, chat, bond and reflect on the day. It's recognised that good eating habits established at an early age can continue into adulthood. So, it's good to

start family mealtimes with our children from a young age – around four to six months old, when they can sit comfortably and watch from a high chair. Shared mealtimes bring other benefits:

- We're better able to monitor how much our child is eating and drinking.
- Children are likely to eat more fruit and vegetables and less unhealthy food.
- Shared mealtimes help to develop children's social skills as they interact with others and learn how to engage in a conversation.
- Chatting over dinner can help to

boost a child's vocabulary.

- The comfort and familiarity of sharing a meal is good for our mental health.
- It also enables us to model table manners, such as how to use cutlery.
- And it can help digestion. Talking and listening can slow down our eating, and sitting upright, as opposed to eating while slumped on the sofa, is better for us.

HAVING A ROUTINE

We need energy to get through the day and this can be maintained by eating at regular intervals. Having regular mealtimes puts a ser-

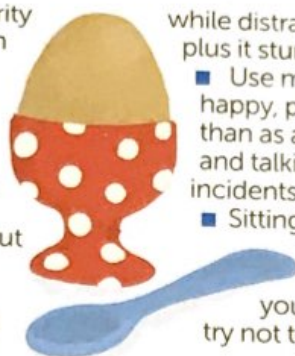


of rhythm and regularity in our lives, which can bring comforting feelings of familiarity and security.

In an ideal world, we'd share breakfast and evening meals together every day, but this is often not practical. Try to sit down with your child and chat to them as they eat, even if you're going to have a meal once they are in bed. Think when it would be possible to eat as a family, perhaps at the weekend.

HOW TO ENJOY A SHARED MEALTIME

- Give your child a small healthy snack when you collect them from nursery to reduce any hunger and demands to eat as soon as you get home.
- Keep meals simple so that they can be prepared with little effort – plan meals in advance and consider batch cooking and freezing dinners for ease on busy evenings.
- Give your child a five-minute warning so they know it's almost time to eat and get in the habit of washing hands before sitting at the table.
- Involve your child in preparing for mealtimes by asking them to lay the table, pour drinks or help to make the food if time allows.
- Make the food the focus of the mealtime by keeping distractions such as toys away from the table and, importantly, turning off the TV – people are found to over- or under-eat



while distracted by the TV, plus it stunts conversation.

- Use mealtimes for happy, positive chat rather than as a time for discipline and talking through incidents of poor behaviour.
- Sitting for too long can lead to irritability, especially with younger children, so try not to drag out meals.

REFUSING TO EAT

It's so disheartening to put time and effort into planning, preparing and cooking a meal only for your child to turn their nose up at it and refuse to eat. Try to be patient with your child and consider these tips:

- They may be attempting to assert control, so try allowing your child to make simple decisions about what they eat – Carrots or peas? Scrambled or boiled egg? – and enable them to serve themselves when possible.
- Perhaps the portion size is too large and is overwhelming, so consider serving less food and ask if they would like seconds.
- Maybe your child is too tired and you should eat earlier.
- Encourage your child to try a small nibble of a food they are uncertain of to expose them to new flavours and get them used to trying different things. Praise them for trying and don't make them eat it all if they dislike it.
- They simply may not be hungry – think whether you are giving them too many snacks in the day or discuss what they are eating through the day with their nursery key person.
- Don't force your child to clear the plate, and try to reassure yourself that they will make up for a poor meal later in the day or week.

story time

Why do we eat?



Why Do We Eat? (Usborne Beginners)

by **Stephanie Turnbull**

Explores why we need food

and what happens to it inside our bodies.

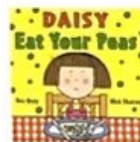


Oliver's Vegetables

by **Vivian French and Alison Bartlett**

Oliver will eat

only chips until he plays a game with his grandpa: whatever vegetable he finds in the garden, he must eat it. See also: *Oliver's Fruit Salad* and *Oliver's Milkshake*.



Daisy: Eat Your Peas

by **Kes Gray and Nick Sharratt**

Nothing will get

Daisy to eat peas – not even mum's promise of a chocolate factory or a space rocket! And cunning Daisy has noticed that mum doesn't like Brussels sprouts.



Pumpkin Soup

by **Helen Cooper**

Cat, Duck and Squirrel's smooth soup-

making routine descends into chaos when Duck one day decides he wants to stir the soup for a change.

→ For more picture book ideas, visit: www.lovelybooks.co.uk/?s=food