



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

A Parent Guide for Table Etiquette – from the First Meal to the Last Supper FAMILY MEALTIME TABLE

Etiquette – protocol, customs, and life-connecting skills – can be taught through multiple settings. Each issue of the *2013-14 Parent Partnership Handbook* emphasizes the etiquette associated with a particular kind of table: (1) the family dinner table, (2) the homework table, (3) the classroom table, (4) the school cafeteria table, (5) the party/social-guest table, and (6) the Eucharistic table. This newsletter focuses on **FAMILY MEALTIME ETIQUETTE**.

Manners matter in the process of building relationships. Appropriate social behavior, both taught and caught, socializes children to relate well to the world about them. The family dinner table is one crucial site to teach children social etiquette, that is, rules of acceptable conduct.

18th century novelist and clergyman Laurence Sterne said: “Respect for ourselves guides our morals; respect for others guides our manners.” The following ideas are examples of showing respect for each member of the family, even at the price of sacrificing personal preference.

• **Voices for Outdoors, Indoors and Mealtimes**

Imagine something sensational like “We just won the Clearinghouse Sweepstakes contest. We are rich!” Direct the family members, at the count of three, to repeat aloud that remark with enthusiasm as though each was the first person to get that news. Identify that the volume sound was a “10.” Ask them to repeat the exercise with a volume of “8.” Repeat for “6.” Explain that volumes 6-10 are outdoor voices; 4-5 are indoor voices; and 2-3 are mealtime voices. Practice the sounds. Whenever reminders are needed, indicate sound preference by a show of fingers.

• **Anticipate Mealtime**

Establish the meal time or signal for mealtime so that family members can separate from their activities, wash hands, and be on time with minimum hassle.

• **Gracious Speech**

Model and expect usage of “the pretty words” like *Please, Thank you, May I? Excuse me, Pardon me, How can I help?* and *Please pass the salt* versus grabbing/shoving

• **Seating Plan and Exiting Plan**

Proactively establish table places that maximize cooperation. Determine your protocol for leaving the table. May individuals leave before the meal is finished? If so, you might require that each person clear his/her place. What is the respectful signal for an individual departure?

- **Preparation and Set Up and Clean Up**

Most family members are capable of contributing to the family meal. Even a preschool aged child can distribute the eating utensils or napkins. Who sets the table, serves the beverage, puts out condiments, scrapes the dishes, hand washes or stacks dinnerware in a dishwasher, washes the table, puts food away, hand dries or empties the dishwasher? In some families members six and older take turns making dessert: jello, pudding, fruit bowl, dishing out ice cream, etc.

- **Meal Blessings and Conversation**

“Great hearts are grateful hearts.” Pray thanks before and after the meal; either a formula or spontaneous prayer. Teach the practice of expressing gratitude to the cook. Perhaps establish the custom of round-robin accounting of some event of the day for which to give thanks.

- **Prioritize Family Time**

Ban the use of electronic devices, reading material or diversionary gadgets from the meal table. Silence “smart phones.” Ignore telephone or text messages during the meal.

- **Conversation Sticks**

Some families keep a container of craft sticks. A separate topic is written on each stick like, *a recent example of kindness*, or *an interesting character (fact or fiction)*, or *the hardest challenge of the week . . .* On occasion, discuss one stick during mealtime.

- **Home Away from Home**

Family table etiquette extends to restaurants, fast food establishments, and self-serve eateries. Engage the children in reviewing the family mealtime protocol before going into a public eating place. Teach children to show respect for those who will come after them and for wait-persons by cleaning up after themselves, using trash receptacles, and replacing chairs. When using a public restroom hold your child accountable to flush the toilet, wash hands, wipe excess water from the sink after use, and report problems to the management.

- **One Family, One Meal**

With the exception of health needs, plan and serve a single meal. Keep on hand – at all times – healthy food alternatives that you can “live with” like fruit, protein bars, peanuts, vitamin supplement. . . . Refuse to argue over a child’s food choices or resistances to the planned dinner meal. Establish the custom that anyone can supplement their meal with the “approved, available alternatives” but that “special order meals” are reserved for birthdays and celebrations.

- **Kitchen Closed**

Some parents establish the custom that once a mealtime is concluded and food put away, the kitchen is closed until the next meal. (They keep on hand healthy food alternatives that are always available.) This practice avoids parent distress when children come late to a meal.

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