

## Make the Most of Mealtimes

There are so many ways to spark children's interest and learning, and it can happen during all parts of your day! Here are some ways to turn mealtimes into times of connection, casual learning, and relaxation. These suggestions will give you a place to start and can lead in many directions based on your children's interests. For additional Learning At Home ideas, visit our [Family Resource page](#).

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As early as toddler age, children are interested in doing things for themselves. Foster independence and help your children feel empowered by having them help with meals. For the youngest, this may mean simply learning to feed themselves. Your older child can do much more. See the box below for more ideas on how your children can help before, during, and after mealtimes.

- ▶ Mealtime is a prime opportunity to foster vocabulary. Discuss the taste, color, and texture of foods with everyone in the family. For older children, build on this by challenging everyone in the family to come up with a new adjective to describe their meals – mashed potatoes can be smooth, lumpy, salty, or buttery.
- ▶ Reflect. Take turns sharing with one another about your day. Share something exciting that happened, something challenging, and something that made you laugh.
- ▶ Test your memory with a table game. Have everyone close their eyes while one person removes one item from the table – a napkin, a fork, a saltshaker. When eyes open again, challenge each person to figure out what is missing.
- ▶ Accomplish homework by discussing it over meals. You can spell words, discuss books, and tackle addition problems or multiplication tables, and so much more. Reduce pressure by turning it into a game in which everyone can try to come up with the answer.
- ▶ Challenge dexterity by eating with different utensils during a meal. If you're feeling adventurous, let children have fun experimenting with a variety of utensils. Can I eat with a large wooden spoon? What about tongs?
- ▶ Test powers of elimination by playing the game *Person, Place, or Thing*. Ask one person to think of an item, place, or person. Have others figure out what it is by asking only yes or no questions. If more of a challenge is needed, limit the number of guesses. For younger children, turn it into a game of *I Spy* by limiting the possibilities to items in the room.
- ▶ Have children make meals even more special by decorating. Perhaps they can lay out a tablecloth, make paper flowers for a centerpiece, or draw a placemat for each person in the family.
- ▶ Encourage your children to figure out what ingredients they can taste in a soup or casserole dish. See if your children can guess them all. To encourage writing, have them write down guesses.
- ▶ Help your children learn more about where food comes from by asking them where they think an ingredient in their meal is grown. For example: *Are carrots grown underground or above it? Do berries come from trees or bushes? Can we grow bananas where we live?*

### How Your Children Can Help With Meals

- ▶ Before your meal is served, assign tasks during meal prep. Your child can wash fruits and vegetables, pour or stir, or help carry unbreakable items to the table. [Click here](#) for more guidelines by age group.
- ▶ Setting the table is a math experience. Gathering plates, cups, and utensils and setting them out for each person involves counting and one-to-one correspondence.
- ▶ Try using smaller dishes so that children can help pass food around the table. This is a perfect time for them to practice taking turns, sharing, asking for things politely, and using “please” and “thank you.”
- ▶ Even young children can start to learn to serve themselves. Start with hand-over-hand guidance and they'll be doing it on their own sooner than you expect!
- ▶ Spills will happen! Keep towels handy and encourage your child to take responsibility and clean up.
- ▶ Make cleanup part of the routine. Your child can help clear dishes, wipe the table, and make sure faces and hands are washed after every meal.