

Ten Tips for Meaningful Mealtimes

By Judi, The Manners Lady

Imagine what our grandparents would say if they heard Canada was celebrating “National Family Dinner Night!” They’d probably say, “Well, where else would you eat dinner? Of course you eat with your family.”

If your family is anything like mine, with both parents working, it’s an effort to get the whole family together to actually sit down for a whole meal and have meaningful conversation. My husband often works late, then there’s soccer, hockey, baseball, piano lessons and Kids Club... let alone phone calls and homework. Planning ahead for mealtime is stressful for many families, and it’s way too easy to give in and just do a “drive through” dinner on the way to a game.

Canada’s First Annual National Family Dinner Night, that was celebrated on Thursday November 3rd, was one of the best ideas I’ve heard in a long time! The idea came from Mac Voisin, founder of M&M Meat Shops, to celebrate M&M’s 25th Anniversary, with support from the Prime Minister.

In just the past decade, the family meal seems to have all but disappeared in too many of our homes. Yet when we were growing up, isn’t that where we learned table manners, social graces, intergenerational conversation skills and we had 40 minutes to regroup as a family and discuss all that had happened during the day? Even clearing the table and washing the dishes (by hand) with my sisters was an important bonding time.

Studies from Harvard and Columbia University have supported what our mothers and grandmothers have always known instinctively; that is, the security and stability of the family meal together is a primary factor in the prevention of childhood obesity, teen substance abuse and poor academic performance.

Let’s make an intentional choice to eat dinner together with our families. Mealtime doesn’t have to be long... nor fancy! Just sit down together, be thankful, eat (politely) and have good conversation. So here are a few tips (including a few good manners!) that may help your family have meaningful mealtimes.

1. Include the whole family (if possible) in helping to set the table and prepare the meal. Kids love to help... they just need to be shown what to do. (for free colouring sheets/placemats on Princess Spoon and Handsome Prince Knife on how to set the table, send an email to: info@Mannersclub.com)
2. Atmosphere! My daughter always asked if we could have

“atmosphere” at the dinner table. That meant candles. Candles meant special!

3. Turn off the TV and put all Game-Boys, Play Stations and newspapers away.
4. Don't even be tempted to answer the phone.
5. Have good conversation. If you want more than just “yes” or “no” answers from your kids, try asking questions that are more specific. Rather than, “Did you have a good day?” ask “What did you do at recess today?” or “Who did you eat lunch with today?” Include Dad and the kids in the conversation. Then, make sure you LISTEN to their answers. Look at the person who is answering your question... and really LISTEN. If you're a good listener, people will think that you're a brilliant “conversationalist!”
6. Play “**The Family Conversation Question Game.**” Slip a QUESTION CARD under each family member's plate which is to be answered during the meal. Questions such as: “When was the best birthday party you ever had?” “How did you and Daddy meet each other?” “What was the funniest prank you ever played on someone?” These questions sure get some great conversation and stories going!
7. Ask each family member to bring a good joke to the table. Nothing dissolves stress and conflict like a good laugh!
8. Good table manners help conversation to be much more meaningful, since you're less distracted by “**The Bad Manners Monsters™**” like Slobbo Roo, Wiggly Jiggly, Messy Bessy, Grabba Jabba and Whiney Rhino and Grouchy Rouchy!
Here are a few tips to keep The Bad Manners Monsters away.
Wash your hands with soap and water, then come into the kitchen and offer to help. (Mom may have a heart attack from your offer.)
Don't start to eat until everyone is seated.
Compliment the chef on the meal.
Chew with your mouth closed and don't talk with food in your mouth. (No one wants to see it.)
Take small bites, in case someone asks you a question.
Say “Please” and “Thank you”... and a quiet “Excuse me” if funny noises happen.
Get the chair for your mom and sisters. (99.9% of women love men to be gentlemen.)
Don't be in a hurry—enjoy each other.
And then... offer to help clean up and do the dishes. (You'll be loved even more!)
9. If you know someone who's family lives far away, such as an international student, invite them to join your family for National

Family Dinner Night, so they're not alone.

10. Finally, make a commitment to eat at least one meal together each day. Even if Dad is going to be late getting home... maybe you can save dessert to eat that together as a family.

So even if you missed the "official" Family Dinner Night last November... let's make every evening that we can... a fun evening "dining in" with our family. Because strong families mean a strong Canada!

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This article originally appeared in the OCHEC Winter 2005 newsletter.

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