

# Positive

January—February, 2007



# Parenting

*YOUR PARTNERS IN PARENTING*

## Make Family Meals a Priority

Sure, it's true, today's families are busy. But if you stop to consider that most mealtimes only last about 20 minutes, this means that three or four shared family meals a week is about one hour—considerably less time than a televised sports event or movie! Regular family mealtimes that include responsive and respectful communication among members benefit all who sit at the table.

Study results consistently show that eating family meals together increases consumption of fruits, vegetables and fiber and decreases the consumption of fried foods, sugary sodas, and artery-clogging saturated fats—just to mention a few of the nutritional benefits. What's more, these healthy eating patterns tend to last a lifetime. But perhaps most importantly, family meals give families a chance to reconnect with each other, which can lead to better parenting, healthier children and improved academic performance.

If you don't spend regular time together, family members grow apart. So how do you get your family back together to have family meals? Here are a few suggestions that might help you restore this endangered tradition:

### **Get everyone involved**

Make your family meals an "everyone pitches in" project. Use this time to talk, as well as for teaching children very important life skills—cooking and cleaning! Get your children involved early in the process. Ask them to help plan the menus, make the grocery lists, shop, prepare, cook and clean-up. You might even consider having older teens be completely in charge of a couple of meals a month. Take care to have this be a pleasant experience, rather than one in which you bark orders, they resent you and everyone ends up in a foul mood.

### **Turn off the TV & phone**

You cannot communicate with one another if your attention is focused on the TV. If there is a favorite program on during the

mealtime, record it to watch later. If you have an answering machine, let it record messages for you during mealtimes so you can stay focused on your family. Or you may want to assign one family member each meal to answer the phone with, "We're eating right now. Please call back later."

### **Create a warm atmosphere**

Strive to keep your conversations light. If mealtime is the only time you see your kids, you may be tempted to unload your frustrations at the table. Resist this urge. The family meal is not the time for disciplining, lecturing, or playing "20 questions." Save problem-solving and serious family discussions for family meetings. Let family meal conversation come naturally and give your children time to open up.

### **Everyone can talk**

We all feel good when we talk and are heard. To be sure each family member can have that

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## But Everyone's Doing It!

A sixth-grade daughter's friends are planning a co-ed sleep over and she wants to go. A seventh-grade son wants to have his eyebrow pierced. Their parents have strong reservations, but these preteens strongly protest, "But everyone's doing it!" Ah, yes, that old, "everybody's doing it" plea.

Is everyone really doing it? To we parents, the answer should be an obvious, "NO, everyone is *not* doing it." But when you're a preteen and are consumed with fitting in and not being left out of the in-crowd, it does seem like everyone is doing it (whatever the "it" of the moment happens to be). Kids also use this plea as a calculated attempt to make parents feel guilty enough to cave in under the pressure.

Ready or not, these requests are just the beginning of many years of negotiations between your children's need for freedom and your need to keep them safe. The intensity of these negotiations only increases when your own family values and rules conflict with those of other families' who have dramatically different values and rules.

So the next time you find yourself being confronted with an "everyone's doing it!" argument,

keep the dialogue between you and your child open and help them build on their growing ability to handle independence. Here are a few suggestions that can help:

### Get more information

Make sure you understand exactly what your child is requesting. Sometimes we misunderstand what our child is really asking. Repeat back your understanding of the request in a neutral way so you're both clear about it. Ask them to make a list of who all of the "everyones" are. Call some of their parents to chat with them about "it." Sometimes it helps to talk with the parents of your children's friends about how they're handling these situations. You might even get a few new ideas.

### Give yourself time to think

Give yourself time to clarify your concerns. Don't let yourself be manipulated or give into feelings of guilt that might cause you to make a decision against your better judgment. But do examine the roots of your concerns carefully before making a decision to avoid being overprotective.

### Talk about your concerns

Be clear about your concerns and give your child a chance to respond and work through them.

### Work out a compromise

If the request doesn't violate any of your family's basic values, try to find a way to give your children some of the independence they're requesting, but within boundaries that feel safe to you. Help your child problem-solve and think about alternatives and consequences.

### When the answer is "No," explain why

If you feel that you've made a thoughtful, reasonable decision, then stick to it, even if your child gets angry. Validate their feelings by saying something like, "I can see that you're angry; I'd be angry too. I understand it's hard for you that some people are \_\_\_\_\_, but I'm just not comfortable with this right now."

As children enter the preteen years, they begin to seek more and more independence and many parents struggle to know how far and how quickly the limits should be rolled-back. The baby steps you and your preteen make now toward greater independence will only serve as a foundation for their later adolescent decision-making responsibilities.

By Kirk Blair, Extension Associate, Human Development & Family Science, Ohio State University Extension.

## Table Manners

If, after all of the holiday gatherings with family and friends, you find yourself wondering if your children have any manners at all, you're not alone. Most parents are probably wondering the same thing. But what can you do about it? LOTS!

Unfortunately, as families spend less time eating together around a dining table and more time around the living room coffee table or on the go in the car, manners seem to be disappearing.

But that doesn't mean they're not important! A few years down the road when your children are ready to enter the "real world," they WILL be judged based on their table manners. So what can you do to help?

Dr. Alex Packer, psychologist and the author of *How Rude! A Teenagers Guide to Good Manners, Proper Behavior, and Not Grossing People Out*, gives these (and other) tips to set your child on the road to good etiquette:

**Check your own example.** Don't burp in the middle of the meal

unless you want your kids to do the same.

**Don't turn dinner into an unpleasant "lecture time,"** which may turn kids off to manners, dinner, and you.

**Explain the rules ahead of time.**

If burping is an issue, explain that in some cultures burping is a way of showing your appreciation, but in America, it's considered rude. If you were to do that in someone else's house, he might think you're a slob and may not want you to come back.

**Look for the good.** Instead of pointing out all the things your child does wrong, point out the behavior in a neutral, practical way. For example: "It's a good idea to unfold your napkin so that if food falls, you won't stain your clothes."

**Approach manners as a game.**

One night a week, try to have a somewhat more formal dinner. Dress up, serve a special meal, and expect more formal manners. That will help improve your kids' social graces.

**Let kids know** that a manners offense doesn't exist if there's

nobody there to see it.

If you eat mashed potatoes with your fingers, and you're alone, or with a friend who has agreed to suspend that manner, it's not a violation.

**Make kids part of the tradition.**

Invite guests over and let kids help serve hors d'oeuvres. This helps them indirectly learn about the manners that surround eating.

**Try dining out once in a while.**

Fast food restaurants don't count. Dining over Styrofoam doesn't bring out the best manners. And you can't pull someone's chair out for her if it's bolted to the floor. Try a nice restaurant and allow kids to order their own food, assist in paying the bill, and figuring out the tip.



By Kirk Blair, Extension Associate, Human Development & Family Science, Ohio State University Extension.

## A New Year, A Fresh Start

Being in the month of January is like standing on the peak of a mountain on a clear day—to the left we see the challenges and choices of last year, and to the right unfolds the fresh landscape of the coming cycle of seasons. How do you want to use the gift of time that the rest of the year will bring?

### Effective New Year's resolutions

Nearly all of us have had the experience of making New Year's resolutions. And most of us have also had the experience of failing to follow through on our good intentions. When this happens on a regular basis, it's easy to become discouraged and to write off New Year's resolutions as a painful exercise in futility that undermines our sense of confidence and hope.

If you are one of those brave souls who, despite less than ideal results in the past, likes the idea of starting the new year by making heartfelt resolutions, three cheers for you! If you refuse to give up, and if you remain open to learning and stay flexible, you will achieve your goals. Remember, where there's a will, there's a way. In any major challenge, the key to success lies in persistence.

Here are a few tips for effective New Year's resolutions:

➤ Don't make too many resolutions at one time. In fact, it's best to focus on one single goal. And make sure it's a goal that you really, really want to accomplish.

➤ Break your goal down into small, manageable steps. That way you can begin making modest progress toward your goal right away, starting today.

➤ Tell important people in your life about your goal and ask them to help you. The more public your goal and the more key people you have pulling for you, the greater your chances of success. But only involve those individuals whom you know will truly support and encourage you.

➤ Make creative use of reminders—little prompts to help you stay focused on achieving your resolution, be it notes on the bathroom mirror or a symbol of your goal displayed on the refrigerator door.

➤ Say no to negative thinking the instant it crops up. Don't think the second negative thought! Choose instead to dwell on thoughts of happiness and success.

➤ Affirm to yourself a key positive phrase such as: "I know that within me is the wisdom and

strength to succeed. Whatever I set my mind to, I can accomplish." Say it with conviction and optimism, again and again. Be sure to find or create a positive thought that feels right for you.

➤ Regularly visualize yourself achieving your goal. Let your imagination see these pictures of success in three-dimensional living color. Use all your senses to feel the reality of your success. Picture yourself in motion, as if on a videotape rather than in a still snapshot.

➤ If you are spiritually inclined, use prayer to invoke assistance, strengthen your faith, and imprint your inner vision of success.

Finally, remember that you're in this thing for the long haul. Don't expect to slip-up, but be prepared for temporary failure in case it happens. If you do slip up, as soon as you can, get back up and try again. And don't waste time mentally beating yourself up. Know that you have been blessed with the power to succeed in your noble resolutions. Persistence is the mother of success. Always try once more.

Source: Sam Quick, Ph.D., Human Development & Family Relations Specialist, University of Kentucky

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opportunity, consider designating one person each meal as the chairperson. The chairperson makes sure everyone has a chance to get their two cents in. If someone has been talking too much, the chairperson could say, "OK, you've had your time. Now let's hear from someone else." Or, if the topic of conversation is leaving most people out, the chairperson could bring talk around to broader issues.

Even though it's important to talk, don't get caught in the trap of thinking every moment must be filled with conversation. We all have times now and then when we don't feel like talking.

It's OK just to be together as a family.

**Be creative**

We all get bored with the "same ol' same ol'," so get input for menu ideas from your kids! Consider trying ethnic food themes, sharing a fondue, making mini pizzas together or having a fajita fiesta with plenty of tortilla chips and salsa. Backyard barbecues, Sunday brunches, and living room picnics can also be enjoyable meal alternatives. What matters is that your family gets together, even if most of the meal is take-out.

**Build family traditions**

Traditions can be simple, like every Saturday morning you have blueberry pancakes or on Friday nights you have banana splits for dessert. Maybe Sundays your family always has a formal dinner with the good china and silver. Other families set a "place of honor" for a person who has a special day, such as a birthday, or achieves an accomplishment, such as getting a great report card.

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# Positive Parenting



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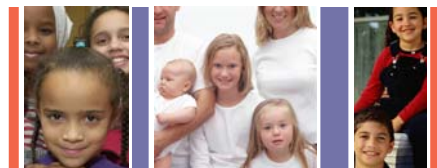
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<http://hec.osu.edu/famlife>



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