

MOTHER LOAD DOULA CARE

Food Fights

All over America, families are engaging and fierce food battles! As parents, we have many ideas of how and what our kids should be eating. Most often this differs from how and what THEY believe they should be eating. Unfortunately, these varied expectations can lead to mealtime becoming a senseless, infuriating power struggle – one that the parents never win. Worse, creating toxic power struggles over food can lead to negative unintended consequences like over/under eating and in extreme cases, even eating disorders.

We can avoid this by accepting one simple and universal truth:

You can't make a child eat.

Your goal at mealtimes is to have the family enjoy socializing with each other. What they eat or don't eat is entirely inconsequential. This is time to share about the day, enjoy each others successes, connect as a family, etc. When you focus on meals as a time to connect with your children, you greatly reduce the amount of unnecessary stress and conflict in your family life. Further, it gives your children the space they need to explore food at their own pace and helps them heed their internal body cues about what and how much they need to eat. Because, as hard as this may be to believe, they're going to do just fine.

We were all toddlers once and very likely ate nothing but mac and cheese, goldfish, and peanut butter crackers. Do you know any adults who eat like this? It all works out in the end. Relax and enjoy your meals with your family!

This is not to say that there aren't rules to mealtime. The primary rule is that all members of the family must sit at the table and behave. When they can no longer sit at the table and behave their meal is done. For younger children, they may end up spending only minutes at the table each meal. When they're done they can go play while the rest of the family finishes.

How can we encourage happy and social mealtimes?

- Make being at the table the best option in the room: no toys, games, or TV in the background. Make the plates happy, foods appealing and conversation lively. Sit at the table with them!
- If they get up or throw their food, then they are communicating that they are done and you take their plate away. It goes in the trash, not on the counter for later. They do not get more food until the next meal (even if that is breakfast the next morning). You will only need to do this few times for them to understand how this works.
- Be reasonable about the time- Start small. Don't expect them to sit there patiently until you have finished your meal. You can only expect a toddler to sit at the table for a few minutes

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at a time. Reward those few minutes with encouragement and attention and that time frame will grow as they get used to the routine.

- Offer only foods that you are comfortable with them eating. Don't give chips, apples and a sandwich if you are not comfortable with them only eating the chips for lunch because frequently, that is what will happen.
- Don't force it. Kids need to try a food 10-15 times before they will start to like it. Small tastes are reasonable. If they don't want to taste it, don't make them. Even the small battles around "just take one bite" rules can encourage children to override their internal hunger mechanisms that tell them when to stop eating.
- Kids make 70% of their food decisions based on what it looks and smells like. They'll be more likely to try new foods if its been presented on the plate in a fun and interesting way. Invest in cookie cutters to make fun shaped treats. Play around with presentation. Make dinner look like a funny face. Bring your sense of humor to plating!
- Kids will feel more engaged if they participate in the creation process. Let them help make dinner! Yes they'll make a mess and it will take longer than if you do it alone. But it is a worthy trade-off for the sense of accomplishment they'll have as your sous-chef. Further, kids are far more likely to try new foods that they've helped to prepare.

Kids eat more as they get older. They have more control over their environment and thus have less need to establish it at meal times. They'll also start to get bored of the same old thing everyday. Going to school and seeing others eating school lunch is huge development. Seeing others eating a wider-array of foods will encourage them to take more food-chances themselves. It WILL get better. In the meantime, sit back, relax, and enjoy your family!

Further Reading:

Food Fights: Winning the Nutritional Challenges of Parenthood Armed with Insight, Humor, and a Bottle of Ketchup (Laura Jana, Jennifer Shu)