

## Mealtime Problems

**M**ealtimes are ideal opportunities for family members to get together and enjoy one another's company. Mealtimes can also be difficult and stressful. Parents may feel that mealtimes have become a 'battle' when children do not eat or behave well. Sitting at a table and eating meals with others is an important skill for all preschoolers to learn. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you make family mealtimes manageable and encourage your preschooler to develop good eating habits.

Learning to sit at a table with others and use eating utensils is a difficult task for preschoolers. There are likely to be spills and messes. Remember that these mistakes are not misbehaviour. Try to stay calm and look for opportunities to praise your child.

### WHAT ARE COMMON MEALTIME PROBLEMS?

Preschoolers may:

- Refuse to come to the table.
- Leave the table during meals.
- Complain about food.
- Play with food.
- Refuse to feed themselves.
- Not do as they are told.
- Eat very slowly.
- Have tantrums.
- Be fussy about what they eat.

### WHY DO MEALTIME PROBLEMS OCCUR?

Preschoolers often find it hard to sit in one place for long periods of time and can be easily distracted. Children are more likely to become restless and disruptive if they find mealtimes too long or boring.

Parents may have unrealistic expectations about what their children should eat and how much they should eat. Preschoolers may like some foods more than others. If children eat a variety of foods, there is no need to insist they eat a food they do not like. Also, appetite can vary from day to day. All children have days when they are not as hungry as usual.

Problems can also occur because of the way family mealtimes are organised. Children find it hard to get into a good eating routine if they can eat whenever and wherever they want. Sometimes efforts to manage children's misbehaviour make the problems worse.

Extra attention during the mealtime such as coaxing, threatening or reasoning can accidentally reward children for misbehaving or not eating.

### HOW TO HELP PREVENT PROBLEMS AT MEALTIMES

#### ▼ Establish a Mealtime Routine

Set up a daily mealtime routine. It is best to serve three main meals and a morning and afternoon snack at regular times each day. Serve your child an amount that you know they can finish. Let them ask for more if they eat everything. Explain to your child that they will only be allowed food at these times and cannot help themselves to snacks.

It can be helpful to set a time limit for eating. Make the time limit clear to your child. Usually, 20 to 30 minutes is enough. You may like to set a timer to signal when the meal is over.



#### ▼ Prepare Your Child Ahead of Time

Let your child know when the meal is almost ready, so they can finish what they are doing — *Danny, dinner will be ready soon, you have time for one more game.*

#### ▼ Explain the Rules

Decide on two or three simple rules for mealtimes and discuss them with your child. After a while your preschooler will be able to say what the rules are. Ideally, rules should tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Here are some examples:

- Sit at the table until you are excused.
- Eat with your spoon or fork.
- Finish your mouthful before you speak.

Before the meal, ask your child to tell you the rules — *So, what rules do you have to remember during meals?* Praise them if they tell you. If your child does not say the rules, calmly remind them.

If there were problems at the last meal, briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow — *Last night you forgot our rule about finishing your mouthful before you speak.* Tell your child what you would like them to do differently this time — *Today, let's see if you can remember to swallow your mouthful before you start talking.*

#### ▼ Talk About Rewards

At first you may like to reward your child for following the rules. Tell your child what they can earn if they follow the rules during the meal. Suggested rewards include a special activity after the meal, or an extra bedtime story.

#### ▼ Talk About Consequences

Decide ahead of time exactly how to deal with problem behaviour. Tell your



child what will happen if the rules are broken. Explain how you will use quiet time or time-out (see over).

### ▼ Get Everything Ready

To prevent unnecessary waiting, make sure you have everything ready before you call your child to the table.

## HOW TO MANAGE MEALTIMES

### ▼ Seat Your Child at the Table

When the meal is ready, seat your child at the table. Remove any toys or other distractions, for example, turn off the television.

### ▼ Encourage Desirable Behaviour

When your child is eating well and following the rules, praise them — *You're chewing very nicely with your mouth closed, Charlotte or That's the way to hold your fork, well done!* Ask your child questions about their day and encourage conversation between mouthfuls.

### ▼ Use Planned Ignoring for Minor Problem Behaviour

Minor problem behaviour can include whining, eating slowly, complaining about the meal or playing with food. It is best to use planned ignoring for these problems. Continue your meal and do not look at or speak to your child until they stop the problem behaviour. When you first try this, be prepared for the behaviour you are ignoring to get worse before it gets better. If you ignore the problem behaviour for a while and then react, you will teach your child that they need to continue the problem behaviour to get a reaction. As soon as your child is eating and behaving well, praise them or involve them in conversation.

### ▼ If Misbehaviour Occurs, Tell Your Child What To Do

Getting up and down from the table, fighting with brothers and sisters or throwing food are examples of misbehaviour that is difficult to ignore. If a problem such as this occurs, immediately tell your child what to stop doing — *Nadia, stop climbing on your chair* — and tell them what to do instead — *sit on your chair please*. Praise your child if they do as you ask.

### ▼ Back Up Your Instruction With Quiet Time or Time-Out

If your child does not do as you have asked or breaks the rule again, use quiet time. Tell your child what they have done wrong — *You have not done as I asked* — and the consequence — *now go to quiet time*. Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them sit quietly away from the table for a short time. Sit your child on a chair nearby. Tell your child they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, use time-out. Say something like — *You are not being quiet in quiet time, now you must go to time-out*. Time-out involves taking your child away from the situation where a problem has occurred and having them be quiet for a short time. Take your child to an uninteresting but safe room or space. Tell your child they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry.

### ▼ Return Your Child to the Table

When your child has been quiet for 2 minutes in quiet time or time-out, return them to the table. Praise your child as soon as they behave well. If misbehaviour occurs again, repeat quiet time or time-out (the same consequence as the last time). You may need to repeat quiet time or time-out a number of times before your child stops misbehaving.

**FOR FURTHER HELP** See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

Written by Karen M.T. Turner, Matthew R. Sanders, Carol Marke-Dadds  
© 1996 The University of Queensland  
Reprinted 2008  
Printed by Hang Tai Printing Co. Ltd.

NOT TO BE COPIED OR REPRODUCED

### ▼ End the Meal

The meal ends when the time limit is up or earlier if everyone has finished eating. At the end of the meal, remove the plates from the table even if your child has not finished eating.

### ▼ Review the Meal

When the meal is over, tell your child what you liked about their behaviour during the meal — *Kate, you sat at the table all through dinner tonight. Well done*. If your child followed the rules, praise them and give them the reward you agreed on before the meal. If problems occurred, do not give the reward or any other food until the next regular mealtime. Briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow — *You forgot to chew with your mouth closed*. Set a goal for the next visit — *Tomorrow let's see if you can remember to eat with your mouth closed*.

## KEY STEPS

- Have regular mealtimes.
- Get everything ready before mealtimes.
- Remind your child of the rules for mealtimes.
- Talk about rewards and consequences.
- Praise and reward your child for eating and behaving well.
- Use planned ignoring for minor problem behaviour.
- Act immediately if misbehaviour occurs.
- Tell your child what to do.
- Use quiet time or time-out to back up your instruction.
- Return your child to the table.
- Review the meal with your child.

As your child develops good eating habits, you will not need to remind them of the rules, rewards and consequences at each meal. Even though you will discuss the rules less often, they will still apply. Use consequences consistently if the rules are broken. Gradually make rewards less predictable by giving them every now and then. Continue to praise your child for eating and behaving well at mealtimes.