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Meal Time, Family Time
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Many people believe that in order to survive in today's world, they have to keep busy all the time. As a result family-meal time may be ordering food through a drive-thru window for some families. A comment made to me once was that everyone is at least in the same vehicle eating at the same time. While that may be true, how can a family concentrate on enjoying one another's company and engage in peaceful conversation when they know that they have only so many minutes to stuff their mouths, swallow their food and make it to dance lessons, sport events or music lessons on time? Although parents want their children to be active in a multitude of activities, are we serving our children's best needs when it comes to spending quality time with our children or talking with them about everyday life? This is not to suggest that you let go of all of you or your child's activities. Try to engage in those that are the most important and enjoyable versus doing it all.

Family meals can provide a great opportunity to spend fun time together while learning more about each other. Why not consider setting aside a few meals each week in which everyone sits down together to eat and enjoy one another's company. Engaging family members in table talk may take practice and at first it may seem awkward. You might also get a few questionable looks. Try some of the following ideas to encourage table time conversation.

Sit at the table for family meals and turn off the television. Also avoid having toys, newspapers and other distractions at the table during dinner. There will be time later for those activities.

The hardest part for some families will be making meal time pleasant by encouraging positive conversation. Don't give up if the first few time feels like a total flop. Take it one step at a time. It will get easier with time and practice.

Try some of the following conversations starters if you need help getting your family talking. What did you eat for lunch or snack today? When I grow up (no matter what your present age) I want to be? The most important things in my life are? The best thing that happened to me today was? What is something funny that happened today? What is your favorite car? Where would you like to go on vacation? What is your favorite television show? What is one of your favorite hobbies? Who is your best friend? Don't forget to ask why their answers are important to them. These questions are meant to be conversation starters and may need other open-ended questions to keep the conversation going. Asking why can also encourage family members to think about things in a new or different way.

Remember that family members of all ages can join in table time conversations. Keep in mind that children of different ages may have very different responses to the questions. Try not to judge the answers that family members give rather seek to understand their responses better by showing you are interested in what they have to say through your words and actions. Conversations can stop pretty quickly if someone feels their responses are not valued or they are being belittled in some way.

Make family meal times fun times while you help your children practice the social skills they need to succeed in other meal time settings. You'll be glad you took the time to share and learn and so will your children.

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