

When life is busy or stressful, it's easy to get into a mealtime rut. The kids plop down in front of a videogame or computer, while a parent is stuck in the kitchen throwing a meal together. Then, everyone eats while staring at the TV and rushes away from the table afterwards. With just a little effort, mealtimes can be much different – from eat-and-run to eat-and-fun. These five tips are from real families who found real easy ways to improve mealtimes in their homes.

Read while dinner is being prepared.

SETTING A 30-MINUTE READING TIME before dinner has big benefits. Silent reading gets kids away from screen-entertainment and improves their reading levels. Having children read aloud has the same benefits, plus the cook has something to listen to! Then, when the meal is served, everyone can talk about what they were reading – an easy conversation starter.



Check in on everyone's day.

IT'S PROBABLY THE OLDEST CONVERSATION STARTER in the book and probably one of the most effective as well. To get a better response from reluctant family members, vary the usual (**how was your day?**) with more specific – and potentially more interesting – questions: **What was the nicest thing you saw today? What was the funniest thing you saw today?**

Map world events.

FOR A MORE GLOBAL APPROACH to mealtime conversations, you can copy a Michigan family who had a large world map on the wall next to their kitchen table. Each night, a different person was responsible for talking about current news or interesting information from a different part of the world. With young children, you could start with a local or state map.



Celebrate traditional and unusual holidays.

HOLIDAYS AND FAMILY BIRTHDAYS can add a healthy dose of fun to mealtimes – but they only fill a limited number of dates on a yearly calendar. Never fear, Earth Calendar is here – at www.earthcalendar.net/index.php. With a click of your mouse, you can find a totally new holiday to celebrate – by date, religion, or country (another use for that world map!).

Create your own dinner theatre.

PERHAPS YOU HAVE A BUDDING ACTOR, musician, or American Idol® contestant in the family? Perhaps this person disrupts mealtimes or tries to monopolize conversations? Channel their creative energy into a specific time (maybe 5 to 10 minutes, before or after meals) for a song, dance, or skit – with a specific night of week dedicated to each person.

