

Family mealtimes really matter – to children and adults. Research studies show that more positive mealtime experiences can lead to better communication among family members, improved performance at school, enhanced reading levels, and better nutrition for children. Here are five easy ways to enhance the quality of your family's conversations around any table:

Create a relaxed atmosphere.

QUALITY CONVERSATIONS happen when mealtimes are as calm as possible – and when there are minimal distractions. This means turning off television and radio news programs. It also means setting aside cell phones (except for emergency calls, of course). Background music can be a nice addition – if it is tranquil, peaceful, and played at low volume.



Focus on laughter and learning.

MEALTIMES ARE WONDERFUL TIMES to share funny stories and to learn new views on current events. They are generally not the best or most appropriate times to discuss difficult or stressful issues. Make a family commitment to focus only on positive topics before and during mealtimes. The goal is to make mealtimes something to look forward to.



Respect and involve every family member.

EVEN SMALL CHILDREN want to be part of family mealtime conversations. Make a conscious effort to engage everyone – from grandparents to toddlers. Be patient with those who take longer to express themselves and actively seek out the opinions of those who are usually quiet. Sometimes it helps to go around the table and give each person a chance to talk.



Use conversation starter cards.

TIRED OF CONVERSATIONS THAT FALL FLAT after a minute or two? Conversation starter cards may be just what your family needs to keep things lively at the table. Place a cup of cards on the table – and take turns picking a card to get a conversation going. You can download free conversation starters at www.school-wellness.org.



Enjoy different viewpoints.

PROMOTING POSITIVE CONVERSATIONS doesn't mean that everyone has to agree completely about everything. Establish a few ground rules – like no teasing, no criticizing, no rude comments about other people, and no talking while someone else is talking. Listen thoughtfully to each opinion – and help children learn to appreciate differences.

