



5 Tips for Delightful Dinnertime and Kitchen Connection

I get it. Dinnertime can often be a hectic mess. You might have children who won't sit, won't eat, won't appreciate, won't help, won't talk, won't zip it, or won't stop poking a sibling. In some households, just sitting together for a meal is nothing short of miraculous. For severe mealtime mayhem, a family summit of expectations may be in order with a strict threat of a dinnerless night (with definite follow-through for heinous offenders).

If your evening meal is anything but a delight, and the gratitude at mealtime is far less than overwhelming, here are a few adjustments to your routine that can make a big difference. "Delightful" might be a stretch in some cases, so if that's your table, have your family summit, aim for "better," and move on from there.

1. **What's for dinner?** Include your family in the planning of your meals. Maybe that looks like letting each child choose the meal 1 night a week. If you have a big family, rotate weekly who gets to choose the menu for "choice night." Maybe it looks like posting a plan on the fridge that includes regular specials like "Wednesday Sandwich Bar" if Wednesdays are a night full of activities. Saturday Soup, Memory Monday (leftovers!), Taco Tuesday, or Chicken ala Thursday (find new and wild ways to serve it) are just a few ways to ease the mind of the meal planner and perhaps widen the culinary horizons of the family.
2. **Who's cooking?** If you have older children (8 and older), let them be the chef for a night each week. Taking ownership of a meal builds confidence and life skills. It doesn't have to be complicated. Even younger kids can help with salads, browning meat, cooking pasta, steaming veggies, simple casseroles, etc. Start with something simple (my youngest made a 7 can "dump chili" that rocked. She completed the meal with all the additions – cheese, sour cream, Fritos and served it with style and a giant, beaming smile.) Once they own a meal, you'll be surprised how excited they get about making dinner.
3. **Table Traditions** – Sometimes, dinner is a time for unloading the woes of the day. I know, not optimal for digestion, but often the only time we're together with folks who care enough to listen. A couple ideas to balance the good with the bad (and ease the heartburn):
Wins/Losses – Everyone contributes a win and a loss for the day. **What I like about you** – each member gets a turn in the spotlight – all others get to say why they're grateful for that member. **Give thanks** for the meal – whether you pray formally or just show your gratitude

to the hands that prepared the food, be sure that thanks are given verbally at each meal. It didn't just fall from the sky and plenty in the world aren't as fortunate.

4. **It's not over 'til it's over!** Everyone stays until the end of the meal which is either determined by one of the parents excusing all, or when all members have finished. I've never been one to let kids eat for 5 minutes and then vacate the premises. It isn't reality in polite society, so setting the precedent early was important to my husband and I. While we don't believe in "the clean plate club" per se, we let the kids choose their serving sizes (at least trying each item we're serving), and then we expect them to eat what they've chosen. We've found that they get what they'd like without wasting food this way.
5. **Share the load.** The chore load, that is! A chore chart or assignment calendar can help with this so you can have proof that daughter #1 isn't truly "ALWAYS" <add dramatic eye roll and heavy sigh> the one to set the table or get beverages for the family or empty the dishwasher. If everyone clears his own plate to the dishwasher (or at least to the sink for little ones), it eases clean-up tremendously. Putting away leftovers helps kids learn estimation (is this container big enough for all this salad?) Drying dishes yields camaraderie (some of the most interesting stories come out over a sinkful of suds). Putting away dishes creates a keen knowledge of where things belong so they can help with chores more often without, "hey Mom! Where's the ...". Even really little kids can sort flatware. Throw on some music and make the process way more fun. (Not responsible for suds flying, air guitar wars with frying pans, or singing into dirty whisk microphones.)

What tips do you have? We'd love to hear from you!



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