

# SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

## Sitting For Family Meals

**Question:** My three-year-old has a hard time sitting at the table for meals with the family. She'd rather go off and play on her own. How can we keep her interested in staying at the table with the rest of the family?

There are many strategies you can use to help your daughter sit with the family during meals and help her be involved in learning at the same time by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

**Communicating** is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

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### Wait until you are ready to serve the meal before you bring young children to the table.

Children tend to have more patience for family meals if they haven't spent a long time waiting beforehand.

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### Create positive routines.

You can create traditions that everyone enjoys, such as each person sharing a memory from the day. You can change the questions for sharing—the funniest thing that happened today, the most surprising thing, the most exciting thing, etc.

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### Involve everyone in the conversation.

Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues taped family meal times and playtimes to determine how these experiences are linked with children's competencies in language, literacy and the skill of Communicating later on. She found that conversations and the use of language make a big difference in how well children learn.

Your child will be more likely to want to stay at the table if the conversation involves her. The most effective conversations go on for more than a few sentences and engage children by asking them to think about what the family is discussing.

For example, you can ask:

- "Why do you think that happened?"
- "What do you think will happen next?"

Ask your child to talk about her experiences and to tell stories about her own life.

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## Use rich and diverse language and ask questions in engaging back and forth conversations.

Another key finding from Snow's research is that some families have wonderfully interesting conversations that include rich and diverse language, even when children don't understand every word the adults are using. So, just by hearing your conversations, she is learning.

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## Play games at mealtime.

Word games also promote Communicating skills. For example:

- Play guessing games with the first letters of words. Ask, "How many foods can we think of that start with the letter?" All family members can take turns giving answers.
  - Word of the day. Ask family members to find a new word to share with the rest of the family.
  - Rhyming games. Ask the youngest child at the table to say a word. Then each family member goes around the table saying a word that rhymes with it until no one can think of any more.
  - Play tongue twisters. Use traditional tongue twisters such as, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" or create your own. For example, have your child name one food on the table. The next person would repeat the word and add another word that starts with the same sound (e.g., "milk, meatball") continuing around the table.

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## Speak often, use different words for the same object, use different types of words and use long phrases.

Anne Fernald of Stanford University and her colleagues found that the way mothers spoke with their children at 18 months helped their children have larger vocabularies and were able to process words faster at 24 months. As Fernald puts it, these "little differences can add up to a big effect." She says:

*For the young child, there are always new things to be learned in almost every sentence they hear. So, that advantage [of processing language more quickly], small as it is, can add up to a big advantage later on because the capacity for learning is then increased.*

In a study of children's memories, Robyn Fivush and her colleagues at Emory University taped conversations between mothers and children. This and other studies have found that the children of mothers who speak in more elaborative ways (the same would be true of fathers) are more likely to have strong memories, better language and literacy skills, and a better understanding of the perspectives of others. In other words, they have better Communicating skills.

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## Elaborate.

You can use the following strategies to keep the conversation going with your daughter:

- Discuss past experience in rich detail;
- Ask lots of open-ended questions or “wh” questions: why, what, where, or who questions;
- Repeat back what she says, thus encouraging her to say more;
- Provide more feedback as the conversation goes back and forth; and
- Show a genuine interest in what she is saying.

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## Share your own stories.

Mealtimes are a great time to share your own stories with your daughter. When you talk with her about your childhood and family history, you are passing down traditions and memories that will bind your family together.