

Mealtime, Family Time

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Dinnertime conversation strengthens a family and gives opportunities to build relationships.

Early one morning our daughter ran into our bedroom and announced, “Mom! Dad! It’s raining in the basement!”

We jumped out of bed and ran downstairs. The dishwasher had malfunctioned during the night, flooding our home. My nine children sloshed around the soggy house, trying desperately to get ready for school. Meantime, my husband and I dragged our food storage from the soaked storeroom to the backyard, where minutes later the sky darkened and rain began to fall.

I could tell it was going to be one of those days.

Later that evening around the dinner table, our soggy family of 11 shared their own sorry tales of the day’s disasters. Our high-school-age daughter broke her front tooth while playing powder-puff football; our junior-high-age children either forgot their band instruments, left gym clothing at home, or missed the bus. Our daughter who attends the university could not find her car in the parking lot and was late for work. Our kindergartner had an accident at recess that required an immediate change of clothing. As the final blow, I realized we had changed our home owner’s insurance policy to a higher deductible which had gone into effect just three days earlier.

After listening to these seemingly never-ending tales of woe over dinner, my five-year-old daughter blurted out loudly enough to be heard over the din of conversation, “Mommy, couldn’t Heavenly Father just put a rainbow over our house?”

We all turned to stare at her, then burst into laughter. Suddenly, we realized that dripping carpets, broken teeth, lost cars, and tight budgets weren’t the end of the world. We still had each other, and soggy or dry, our greatest joys came from being together as a family. Talking about our day at dinnertime had helped us remember that.

Our family time around the dinner table has provided healing balm for many such trying days. With the busy lives each of us leads, we’ve found that mealtime together has taken on added importance. President Spencer W. Kimball said: “It is important for us also to cultivate in our own family a sense that we belong together eternally, that whatever changes outside our home, there are fundamental aspects of our relationship which will never change” (“Ocean Currents and Family Influences,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1974, 112–13). Despite differing circumstances, every family can make eating at least one meal together every day a family priority. Following are some ideas that have helped our family make the most of mealtime.

Think of mealtime as a celebration. After our whole family has survived another day, with all of its ups and downs, we come together in the evening and celebrate together. We don’t have to

wait for birthdays or holidays to be happy together. Life is short. It doesn't matter that we're eating macaroni and cheese with mismatched forks. What does matter is that we make mealtime a relaxed and enjoyable time together. Barbara B. Smith, then general president of the Relief Society, said, "Let us make our kitchens creative centers from which emanate some of the most delightful of all home experiences" ("Follow Joyously," *Ensign*, Nov. 1980, 86).

We begin our meals with family prayer. This is a great way to invite a spirit of gratitude to our table. Grateful families are happy families.

It's also important to bring a cheerful attitude to the table. I think my children will forgive me if I overcook the meat loaf as long as I don't forget to bring my sense of humor to the table. According to Proverbs, "He that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast" (Prov. 15:15). I believe that families who laugh, last.

Inviting guests such as missionaries, neighbors, or friends to join us in a meal is another way to bring joy to mealtimes. Dinner guests tend to add a little spice to an otherwise routine daily meal.

Plan for quality mealtime conversation. Mealtime conversations can be a genuine family lifeline to connect busy families swimming in a sea of hectic and conflicting schedules. A poll was taken by the *Reader's Digest* magazine to determine what factors contributed most to a child's success in school. Surprisingly, one thing they found was that "students who regularly shared mealtimes with their families tested better than those who didn't" (Rachel Wildavsky, "What's Behind Success in School?" *Reader's Digest*, Oct. 1994, 49). Simple questions during dinner conversation about a child's performance in school motivated children to work harder and do better in their studies. In fact, families who eat together are more likely to take an interest in what *all* family members are doing.

To achieve quality conversation time, we find it helps to eliminate as many distractions as possible before we sit down to eat. Blaring televisions and stereos or telephones ringing make it impossible to focus on the old-fashioned art of person-to-person conversation.

Next, my husband and I have experimented over the years with many methods of steering dinnertime conversation, with varied amounts of success. We've found table talk a good time to teach our children in an informal way (see sidebar, "Table Talk"). The most important thing we've learned is to keep mealtime positive. Family conflicts can be solved at a different time and place.

We've also found it's important for every family member to have a voice. This means we have to take turns talking. This is easier said than done because older or more assertive family members tend to monopolize the dinner table conversation. Sometimes we take turns talking by going around the circle reading our favorite scripture, relating one good or sad thing that happened to us during the day, or sharing some interesting bit of new knowledge we've gained. We also like to discuss and evaluate movies, books, world news, or what the children are learning in church or school, or share a new joke we've learned. We keep the scriptures and other good books within arm's length of the table. We often use the dinner hour to plan for upcoming vacations and holidays.

Some of my best dinnertime conversations have taken place after the meal while I'm doing the dishes side by side with a son or daughter. Doing the dishes provides me with quiet one-on-one time every day with one individual child. I try to remember that I'm not simply teaching dishwashing techniques but building a loving relationship.

Create loving mealtime traditions. With a family of 11, we live on a tight food budget that requires creative alternatives to high-priced restaurant meals. Some memorable family dinner hours have taken place in unusual settings. One of our favorite dining tables is an old picnic table in the mountains near our home where we cook tinfoil dinners served with lots of catsup. Once we camped out on the last day of summer in our own backyard, where we built a fire and roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. It doesn't really take more work or more money to alter the setting for meals—just a little creativity and playfulness.

Another loving tradition that I especially appreciate is a dinner table routine my husband began years ago. He walks around the table at dinnertime and gently acknowledges each family member from the youngest to the oldest with a warm touch, pat, or kiss on the cheek—including me. There is something soothing and healing about a gentle touch or warm embrace that words can't duplicate. Some families like to hold hands while they pray. Others make it a habit to put their arm around those sitting next to them. The important thing to remember is that all families need to show their affection daily for each other to remain close.

Teach the gospel. President Ezra Taft Benson said that “mealtime provides a wonderful time to review the activities of the day and to not only feed the body, but to feed the spirit as well, with members of the family taking turns reading the scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon” (“Strengthening the Family,” *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1970, 51).

With our widely varying schedules and daily activities, moments spent at dinnertime teaching gospel truths help our children put the events of their day into a proper perspective. Elder A. Theodore Tuttle, then of the Seventy, said, “I know a man who teaches his children at mealtimes. He has a habit of asking two or three gospel questions. He says he can always get the attention of his teenagers when he says, ‘I have a dollar question for you’” (“Covenants, Ordinances, and Service,” *Ensign*, May 1984, 24).

Make dinnertime a family commitment. It is important for family members to make an effort to be home for dinner, if possible. If any family member is consistently absent from dinner for any reason, it may be time to make changes or adjustments that will allow family members to have at least one meal together during the day, if possible. It takes lots of unhurried time to nurture and enjoy our families. Children grow up, and parents grow old. There is not enough time to put off loving.

Although Heavenly Father won't always put a rainbow over our house, as my five-year-old requested, I know our family memories will be sweeter if we take the time to make our meals together more enjoyable by praying together, talking to each other, sharing loving mealtime traditions, reading from the scriptures, and showing our sincere affection and gratitude for each other.

Let's Talk about It

This article may furnish material for a family home evening discussion or for personal consideration. You might consider questions such as:

1. How can we use mealtime conversation to foster closeness among family members?
2. As children grow up and family schedules conflict, how can mealtimes be better observed and used for teaching and training family members?
3. Are there special mealtime traditions that your family observes? Are there new ones you'd like to begin in order to increase mealtime enjoyment and family love?

Table Talk

Dinnertime table talk provides opportunities for families to casually discuss concepts such as honesty, moral purity, or civic responsibilities. Such dinnertime table talk can open doors for gospel discussion, family stories that convey important values, or conversations about productive ways to conduct ourselves under various circumstances.

These occasions take on added significance for some families when dinnertime may be the only time they get together, or for some families in which one or more individuals have attitude challenges relative to gospel or parental instruction. For example, some struggle with a family member who gives little support for family home evenings or struggle with teenagers or young adults who resist gospel teachings. For all such families, short, informal discussions at mealtimes are one more way to bring gospel principles to mind.

Some potential table talk discussion starters follow—items that essentially require no advance preparation—and which can encourage meaningful table talk for some families:

Potential Discussion Starters

1. “You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you” (Dale Carnegie). What do you think this quote means?
2. If you saw a friend drop a quarter, would you point it out to him—or keep it? What if he dropped a \$100 bill? Do you think some people are honest in things when it is convenient and easy to be honest but dishonest when there is really something to gain? If so, are they really honest?
3. Why do you think lending institutions offer credit cards and other businesses offer easy-credit plans? Do people sometimes agree to pay back more than they can? What happens when they can't make the payments agreed to? What thoughts do you have about borrowing money?
4. “He who merely knows right principles is not equal to him who loves them” (Confucius). What do you think this quote means?
5. What kinds of jobs do you think are generally available to those with a high school diploma or its equivalent? associate's degree? bachelor's degree? master's degree?

doctoral degree? What other kinds of educational opportunities are available besides colleges and universities? What kinds of jobs do you think are generally available to persons with these educational backgrounds?

6. If your best friend or hero or heroine came to the house right now, is there anything you would want to look different in our home? Do you have ideas on how we can help each other make our home a pleasant place to live?
7. It's a wonderful feeling when someone chooses to date you from among all the other available young people. Yet while you date, what should you learn about the person you are with?
8. If you are on a date or any other kind of activity and find yourself feeling uncomfortable with your date's or someone else's manners, speech, attitude, or choice of activities, what are some of the things you can do about it?
9. Everyone experiences fear at times. What kinds of things have made you afraid? What can we do when we feel afraid? When should we call a friend or a neighbor or dial an emergency number?
10. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" ([John 8:32](#)). What do you think this quote means?
11. Imagine you're at a friend's home for a meal and you don't care for something served. What should you do—and how?
12. What should be our attitude toward pets and toward other animals and wildlife in general?

Example, if needed: Joseph Smith once cautioned some men not to kill three rattlesnakes found inside a tent. "Let them alone—don't hurt them!" he said. So the men took the snakes carefully on sticks to the other side of the road and set them free (see *The Teachings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl [1997], 39). What does this teach us about showing respect for all living things? When is it appropriate to kill an animal?

13. What different kinds of choices did each of us make today? How are these choices—small or big—helping to set the course of our lives?
14. Am I the only person at the table who at some time in my life ignored good counsel? If you have also made such mistakes, what did you learn from the experience?
15. Is there a difference between making a simple mistake because of ignorance and making a choice to do something when we know better? What are some examples?
16. A lot of people seem to get angry in today's world—on TV, at school, in sports, and so forth. What are the results of getting upset? Is it the best way to solve a problem?
17. When we find ourselves in situations that cause us to feel upset, how can we behave or respond in mature and polite ways?
18. Scriptures teach that when we are angry we should use a soft answer (see [Prov. 15:1](#)). Do we have any ideas what this might mean?
19. "There may be luck in getting a good job—but there's no luck in keeping it" (Jonathan Ogden Armour). What do you think this quote means?
20. "Study the past if you would divine the future" (Confucius). What do you think this quote means?

21. “I was thinking about an incident that happened to _____ (your grandparent or other ancestor).” Tell a family story that represents a good point or principle to live by. After telling the story, tell why you like it and what it means to you. You might ask if family members at the table recall other family history stories meaningful to them.
22. Every age of our lives can be a good age. What do you think are some of the lessons of life we might learn at different ages—such as 10? or 16? or 25? or 65? Is there anything we can do to make our time now a good age to be?
23. “Character is the ability to carry out a good resolution long after the mood in which you made it has left you” (Frank Gains). What do you think this quote means?
24. Do people around you ever make fun of others? How are we supposed to feel about that or how should we respond when we see that happen? Is there anything we can do?

Readers are invited to share suggestions, experiences, and items for possible dinnertime table talk by sending them to Ensign, 50 E. North Temple St., Salt Lake City, UT, 84150-3224. Write “Table Talk” at the top of page 1 of your submission.

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