

Proactive Parenting: January 2018

Food, Family, and Real Nourishment

"It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so entwined that we cannot think of one without the other" writes M.F.K. Fisher. Over the holidays, we probably gathered with family and friends, shared a meal in celebration, and created or renewed traditions. These nourishing rituals that bind families together need not be reserved for special occasions. In our day-to-day lives, preparing food and 'breaking bread' together are among the most elemental ways to provide for, nurture one another, and demonstrate love. It can be a satisfying experience when your children enjoy the food you put on the table, regardless of who does the actual cooking, or it can be frustrating and worrisome if they repeatedly reject foods, leaving you scrambling to find something they will eat. It may be hard to imagine a family meal without power struggles, without worrying if your child is eating enough to sustain healthy growth, without bribing them to eat healthy options, without the stress of having them stay at the table for more than a minute or two, and without feeling like a short order cook trying to please everyone's particular palette.

Imagine reframing how you think about mealtime and food in a way that puts the focus on a broader meaning of nourishment. Nourishment that; encompasses more than food, sustains connections that 'feed' your child's spirit, and springs from creating and preserving time for every member of the family to be present to each other. When we focus on creating regular and safe routines for sharing each other's day, daily if possible, but at least a few times a week, at dinner, or breakfast, or whenever it works with everyone's busy schedules, then we demonstrate the value of being together. Whether our day has been challenging, discouraging, exciting, or mundane, we gain sustenance from being seen and heard, comforted and acknowledged. It's a powerful way to nourish each other and the family unit as a whole, and trying new foods becomes easier when consumption is a secondary goal. So how can you get to a place where this is possible in practical terms? Last fall a parent at school who is a nutritionist at Boston's Children's Hospital led a workshop addressing these challenges. Much of the information she shared came from the book; "How to Get Your Kids to Eat...But Not Too Much" by Ellyn Satter. Ellyn's 'golden rule' for mealtime, especially with young children, is that parents decide the what, when and where of eating, the child decides how much and whether or not to eat. Children, especially young children, control very few things in life. What they put in their bodies is one of those things, so keeping mealtimes free of power struggles is essential to lowering stress levels. Other very helpful advice paraphrased below includes:

- Eat at a table as a family as often as possible, and have kids sit at a table when eating snacks and meals.

-Avoid distractions like TV, video games, or the radio, so your child can pay attention and family members can connect to each other.

-Give your child enough time to enjoy the meal, generally twenty to thirty minutes, but if your child is finished earlier or starts acting up, excuse them from the table. Help kids become aware of when they are full and practice this from an early age.

-Offer small servings to start. It's better to start with less and wait for your child to ask for more before giving seconds. Never force or pressure your child to eat or finish a certain amount of food.

-Give your child three foods, one preferred, one 'hit or miss', and one new food to try. The goal is to become comfortable having new food on their plate without pressuring them to eat the whole thing. With each new food you can ask them to: smell, kiss, lick, nibble, or bite the food. Five to ten times at each one of these steps may be necessary (smelling, licking, etc.) before they will move to the next step. Kids often need to try foods eight to ten times before deciding they like or don't like something.

-Do not give them something else to eat if they aren't eating what you serve, and don't offer other food until the next snack or mealtime. Think about nutritional concerns in terms of what they are eating over the course of a several days or a week, rather than just one meal.

-Do not reward or bribe your child with food. Saying: "If you eat your broccoli, you can have ice cream", teaches a child that some foods are better than others.

-Model appropriate behavior and your child will slowly learn how to act at the table by eating with you and watching the example you and your family set.

One final note of research from the publication; 'Your Brain; "A family dinner confers a host of emotional benefits, especially for kids. Kids whose families eat together five times a week or more have better vocabularies, are less likely to drink or use drugs, are better adjusted emotionally, and do better in school. But keep the TV and other screens off. The 'magic' doesn't work if you are sitting in the same room but not communicating."

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