

Parents'

Perspectives on Mealtimes

based on interviews by Cecelia Alvarado,
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by Bonnie Neugebauer

What is a typical evening meal in your home?

Yueh-Kuei: We have four dishes — two vegetable, one meat, one fish — plus soup and rice. If there is only one dish, my husband is very upset — is that all? So he wants four dishes.

Albert: A typical dinner in this house is Janice will cook brown rice and vegetables. We eat very healthy at home. I like to have chicken sometimes; sometimes I will cook like a Chinese dish with curried shrimp and rice.

Camille: We always try to eat together even if it's 7:30 or 8:00; I'll just give my child a snack. He wants to eat with us, so it's always the three of us. We usually light candles and we turn the TV off; it's the time we all talk.

Eileen: Dinner time is not just for eating, it's for family togetherness, family contact, so even if he is done eating very quickly, I will say to him "Please sit down" and "I would like to talk to you a little more," because my goal is that even if he is not going to eat dinner with us, that at some time in the future, he would come sit down and talk to us.

Kristin: Connor always helps to set the table; he loves doing that. He does the napkins and he likes putting his dishes in the dishwasher. It's great for getting him to participate.

Nina: We all eat together at basically the same time every day. We pray before we eat, and that is something that Marina has started to do which is pretty neat. We sit in the living room.

We have a table in the living room and, before we eat, Marina sets the table. Actually she and I do it together.

What eating rituals are important to you?

Eileen: We have a candle; I think it really signifies that it's a different time of the day. I remember we had a candle when I was a kid, and you knew dinner was over when the candle was blown out.

Cam: In my Chinese culture, before you pick up the chopstick, you invite your parent to eat first. You say: "Mom, Dad, eat dinner." And they take the first bite and then you pick up chopsticks.

Albert: We try to say a grace. Also we talk about little things so at least my son will be able to join into the conversation.

Ling-Tai: Waiting. Sometimes we eat dinner at 8 o'clock because my husband comes home late. We come together and pray and talk because this is the best time we have to talk. In the morning, we hurry.

How should table manners be taught?

Hio Lim: We teach him, you cannot use your chopsticks to have fun. When food is in front of you, don't cross to get something on other side. When you touch it, you take it.

Ling-Tai: We model behaviors like how to carry your bowl to the sink without noise. When my daughter was young, we helped her practice carrying her bowl.



Which manners are important to you?

Chew with your mouth closed. • Say “Please.” • Don’t talk with food in your mouth. • Don’t talk with chopsticks pointing at people. • Participate in the conversation. • Don’t make noise with chopsticks in bowl. • Use your napkin. • Finish rice. You don’t have to finish everything. • Don’t throw food around. • Don’t take too many things in your bowl. • Finish food in bowl before taking more. • Stay at the table until you are excused. • Keep tidy. No spilling rice. • When leaving say: “I’m leaving now, enjoy yourself.” • If only a little is left in dish, say: “May I have this one?”

Kristin: We do modeling and then talk about it. We use napkins; we tell him to keep his napkin on the table because we want him to use that napkin instead of his sleeve. If it’s in his lap, there is no way he will use the napkin. We are trying to elongate his participation at the table so he may be done and want to get down and play. But he has now learned to say, “Mommy, are you done eating?” and I will say, “No, I’m still eating.” So he will sit there and wait. Regarding manners, it’s just modeling good behavior.

Sue: I want him to sit still. He’s always sitting on his knee, half his bottom.

Eileen: We are encouraging him to use utensils, not to lean or climb on the table. I don’t want him to become an adult who leans on the table with his elbows and shovels food in his mouth.

Camille: Table manners should be taught by example, and you should use a napkin so your child will. We impress that you do not interrupt others at the table.

Hsiu-Tuan: Watch everyone so each gets a share. Sometimes take three and let others have a chance before taking more.

Rita: The only thing I *don’t allow* is throwing food around. It is important that if Nitashi doesn’t like something not to take it out of his mouth and put it on my plate. He can put it on one side of his plate or next to his plate, but not on my plate. Keeping limits, not barging into somebody else’s space is important.

Is it important to encourage children to try different foods?

Sue: I remember when I was young I only ate certain stuff. Most of the stuff I eat now I didn’t eat before. Nina: It’s not really hard to get my daughter to try different foods. There are certain things she says she doesn’t like, and I ask her how she knows she doesn’t like it if she hasn’t tried it yet. I cut off a little piece or put it on a spoon and tell her to try a little bit and see if she likes it. Most of the time, she says, “I like it.” If she says she doesn’t like it, I say okay, at least we know now that you don’t like it.

Camille: I have a very limited repertoire of what I will eat. My husband, on the other hand, is really into trying new foods and loves all kinds of food. It’s more of an issue with him that he try a lot of different foods.

Hio Lim: Sometimes I try to give my child another flavor.

Should a child eat everything on her plate?

Kristin: I absolutely don’t care if children eat everything on their plate. I would never force Connor to eat, but I would like him to try different foods. I would never force him. I think children self-regulate. If he is not hungry, he’s not hungry; he’s not going to die. He is a very healthy child, and he will be very hungry for breakfast then.

Hio Lim: My child can’t play until he finishes. If he has no reason, I force him to sit there.

Eileen: Food is a non-issue. You don’t give a child a huge plate of food, you give them a teaspoon of things; then you don’t worry about wasting food or stuff the child either. If they want more, they can always get more. I probably don’t know how much my son eats at dinner. I spend time talking and eating my own dinner; I don’t pay attention to what he has and hasn’t eaten.

Albert: I don’t think a child should eat everything on their plate. To me, they should have a choice; if they have had enough, they’ve had enough. You shouldn’t force a child to eat everything on his plate.

Nina: I try to enforce that; some things she just doesn’t like, but I like for her to try them before she says no. I serve her only a little and if she wants more I give her more. I don’t like to give her big portions because I know she won’t eat it. If I serve her very little, I want her to finish what’s



on her plate, but if I know it's too much, then I don't expect her to eat it all.

Pat: We have two different eaters; we have Jack who has a very limited menu of what he will eat and then we have Tommy who eats everything. He eats salads, tacos, chili; he'll eat steak, ham, chicken. You put it in front of this kid and he will eat it. Jack likes chicken, plain hamburgers. We always make sure there is something on the menu for him to eat.

What foods make a good meal for your child?

Yueh-Kuei: When I make my son Chinese food to take to school, some kids say it's yucky. So he doesn't want to bring it anymore.

Ling-Tai: That happened to my daughter who brought sushi. I told her: "You like it, you eat it. It's not someone else who must like it, just you." Sometimes I let my daughter bring seaweed for snack. Lots of her friends from the same culture say: "Where did you get this?" "I like it." "Mommy, they like this!"

Rita: It's hard because Nitashi couldn't eat what the other kids were eating. Sometimes the teachers had a hard time being comfortable with having to fix something different for him even if it was just a bowl of fruit. It was hard for us because of our particular needs.

Sue: Everybody in Asia eats a big breakfast. People here don't eat breakfast.

Ling-Tai: In Montessori, there is a picture showing how much to take and then children help themselves.

Nina: She likes noodles and pasta. She also likes sandwiches. Fruit and vegetables are what she likes a lot. At school she eats lunch so she has a really well balanced meal at lunch. Kind of like vegetables, salad, bread, noodles or potatoes, and a main dish.

Eileen: I especially like the way teachers sit with the children. They don't stand and serve them; they sit down at the tables with them.

Interviewers:

Cecelia Alvarado, director, *Taking the Lead Initiative*, Wheelock College, Boston, Massachusetts, was chair of the Early Childhood Education Department at Santa Barbara City College from 1982-1997. She is past president of the California AEYC, member of the core writing group of the National Latino Children's Agenda, a trainer for the CAEYC Leadership in Diversity Project, and a consultant to the Latino Channel for Learning and various school districts and government agencies.

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Special Thanks to These Interviewees:

Yueh-Kuei Yang, Camille Trunket, Kristin Kelly-Casas, Carol Leonard, Willa Cobb, Hio Lim Lei-che, Pat Burke, Nina Montoya, Annie Montoya, Leslie Hunter-Gadsden, Janice Pendarvis, Albert Glenn, Eileen Schopen, Hsiu-Tuan Honeyman, Rita Mori, Stephen Russell, Luz Cardona, Ressie Goins, Jackie Dawson, Tai Hang Che, Blanca Tavera, Ling-Tai Jang-chen, Mary London, Sue Luo.

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