



## Mealtime Mischief

### – Situation –

Our problem is mealtime. I spend the entire meal saying, "Alexander, you need to eat." The rest of the family finishes and I am still sitting at the table coaxing him.

Our daughter, Breanne, who just turned three, monopolizes our evening dinners: talking the whole time; interrupting others; or getting up and running around, which means chasing her down over and over again, to bring her back to her place.

Our son, Jose is four. He says, "I hate this," as soon as he comes to the table. 'This' could be anything. He says he hates 'it' before he even sees what 'it' is. Most nights we end up giving him a bowl of cereal. Some nights I have to make a special trip to the store because we have run out of cereal and he won't eat anything else.

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### – Solution –

#### Indigestion or Survival?

Does your family's mealtime motto seem to read:

*'Chaos, conflict and indigestion for all'?*

Has the butting of heads supplanted the breaking of bread at your table? Do you spend more time *chewing out* your children than chewing your food? Are family feasts more frustrating than festive?

What are mealtimes like at your house? What would you like them to be?

#### Why eat?

The first question really is *why do we eat?* What is the purpose of eating in your house? Is it to fill bellies, enjoy food, and spend time together or is it a rushed interruption in an overscheduled day?

A few weeks ago, I insisted a friend get her cup of coffee in a take-out cup because we didn't have time to sit in the café while she drank it. My friend, a native of France, told me that in France they didn't use take-out cups because the main reason for coffee was companionship. It is a viewpoint worth pondering.

What if your child isn't hungry at mealtime? Is a carrot for a snack less nutritious than those in the evening soup? What if your child hungers for attention more than food? Did you have a moment to enjoy time with each other today? What if your child only eats junk food? Who does your grocery shopping? Why do we eat? Think about it.

#### Thankfulness.

In much of the world food is scarce and survival a struggle. In cultures where food is abundant, it is easy to forget its value. Mealtimes are meant to be happy occasions: times to connect with each other; share the day's news; and break bread with those we love.

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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Around the world people come together to eat and give thanks for one another, for shared food, and for time together. Beginning meals with rituals: a time of prayer; moments of silence; or a linking of hands, establishes an atmosphere that honors this part of the day. Such moments fit into even the busiest of lifestyles. (We did sit and visit while my friend enjoyed her latte.)

### Think about it.

Watch dinner tonight. What happens at your dinner table? Alexander's mom listened to herself and discovered how often she repeated her, "You need to eat your food now," warnings while Alexander kept ignoring them. Why did she keep saying it? She asked herself that question and had no answer. Why did Alexander ignore her? Why not? He knew she would keep saying the same thing, do nothing yet continue to give him her complete attention. Attention is attention and children will take what they can get.

Alexander, the youngest of four children, had found a way to get his mom to himself. The payoff at the meal's end was even better. The longer he could make his string beans, potatoes, or chicken nuggets last, the longer he *had her*.

### Hush. Hush.

For the next week Alexander's mom decided to limit herself to two warnings (she couldn't bear to say nothing at all). She also decided to leave the table even if Alexander was still eating. The first time she got up, Alexander tried to get her (and the attention) back by stirring ketchup into his milk. That got mom to return but only to say, "Looks like you have finished. Let's clear your plate. You may help me clean up the table." Cleaning the table together was atten-

tion, but the kind that is good to encourage. Helping mom gave Alexander a way to contribute and feel noticed.

By the end of the week Alexander was eating most of his dinner — without reminders. If he dallied, mom kept mum. The rest of the family talked about their day and everyone's digestion improved.

### Head of the Table.

Breanne's family took a look at their mealtime, too. Breanne kept things hopping at her house and she was in a great position to do so. Why? Because Breanne sat at the head of the table — front and center. The only thing she lacked was a spotlight to shine on her antics. On one side of the table sat mom; across from her sat Breanne's older sister, Anika; and tucked into the corner, sat Dad.

Those table positions said a lot. Dad's seat, wedged between the table and wall made it hard for him to get up. Who chased Breanne and returned her to her place at the table? You guessed it — mom. Meanwhile Anika's seat relegated her to the sidelines, physically and metaphorically. Anika's attempts to talk couldn't compete with Breanne's center stage performance.

Breanne's parents decided to redo their seating plan. Dad moved his chair next to Mom's and Breanne got Dad's old seat by the wall, which had the added advantage of making it harder for her to get in and out. No one sat at the head of the table. They told Breanne that when she got up they would ask if she was finished eating. If so she would need to clear her plate and find something quiet to do while the rest of the family finished. They put these changes into effect at the next meal.

Mom and Dad looked for more productive ways to give Breanne attention outside of mealtime. Mom and Breanne would read a story while dinner cooked, Breanne and Anika helped Dad set out the silverware and plates, or they would all take a short walk before or after dinner. Meals grew calmer. Breanne became part of the family instead of its focal point. Without all the jumping up and down, Anika could tell about her school projects and reconnect with her parents, something they realized they had been missing since Breanne's birth.

### Yuck! What's That?

Instead of starting each meal getting upset when Jose would say he "hates" whatever was for dinner, mom suggested beginning meals by naming one thing each of them felt happy about that day. She invited Jose to go first, which gave him instant attention but in a positive way.

Mom also invited Jose to help her with planning menus and cooking, providing both a new perspective and special time together. Jose likes hearing his family's comments on things he helped prepare. This week he washed the potatoes for baked potatoes, stirred the muffin batter, and tore the lettuce leaves for the salad. This new attention has resulted in less interest in the old kind he used to get by complaining. The complaints still happen, but with less attention they happen less. Now, if Jose says he doesn't like something, his mom says, "Let's remember that when we plan next week's menu so you can suggest something you do like when we have this."

Last of all Mom thought about the Lucky Charms beckoning from the kitchen cupboard. If she didn't buy them, Jose wouldn't be able to eat them. Or if she did buy them but not replace

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them until the next week's grocery shopping, then if he ate them all in the first day or two, there wouldn't be any left. If he chose not to eat after they ran out, she would say and do nothing, trusting that he would not starve without them.

Jose does make an occasional dinner of Lucky Charms, but since they're available less, he is discovering that the rest of the food isn't so "yucky" and at no point has he been in danger of starvation.

### **Feeding the Real Hunger.**

Hunger makes our bellies rumble but in our spirits we feel a different hunger. We need attention; time to connect with one another and time to feed both body and spirit. Consider posting a new mealtime motto at your house:

*'Calm, cooperation, and "bon appetit" to all.'*