Researchers tell us that the act of families eating meals together and sharing conversations has positive benefits for children. These studies show us that children who eat with their families have healthier weight, better school performance, especially reading achievement, fewer incarcerations, less acting out sexually, and better family communication.

Think about these strategies for making a positive family mealtime.

**Set the table**

Think about breakfast, lunch, dinner…people sitting and eating together, sharing bowls of food. Nice. A pleasant environment and people sitting around the table together are a part of the picture for family mealtimes. Get rid of distractions. Agree to let phone messages go to the message mode and turn off the TV. Take some time together.

**Use routines**

Set a time for the meal to begin and make it routine. Agree on a ritual for everyone to pass food around and serve themselves. Even the smallest children can serve themselves if the serving utensils are right. A smooth routine where children and family members know what comes next, and how things work helps people relax around the mealtime. A relaxed environment and smiling people make the table beautiful.

**Think “I can't wait to eat with my family”**

If the meal is breakfast, talk about exciting things that are coming up today. If it’s dinner, initiate a routine of telling something that was a success that day, and perhaps something where you made a mistake. Avoid using mealtimes to discuss tense topics or solve stressful problems. Save those for after the meal. Some folks are a bit grumpy at breakfast, and that’s ok, but those who are less talkative in the am should not be allowed to spread gloom over the table.

**Everyone counts at the table.**

Encourage everyone at the table to have a role at the table. Make a habit of giving each person time to answer questions and time to offer idea. Be certain everyone waits to hear responses and ideas before jumping in and talking over the less boisterous or less talkative people. Be extra certain to wait for young children to answer questions at the table. Young children are just learning vocabulary and information. Thinking about what to say, and then figuring out how to say it takes time. Sometimes conversation rushes right by the young child’s thinking process. Be fair to the youngest at the table. Give them time. Always follow up with young children to be sure they get to talk.

**Find your style**

Some families joyfully engage in raucous discussions, while others may have “one person speaks at a time” discussions. Whatever fits your family’s style is fine, just as long as everyone gets a respectful hearing on their ideas and thoughts. The idea is to keep a relaxed and stimulating environment.