

# ESTABLISHING MEALTIME EXPECTATIONS



## Establishing Mealtime Expectations

As you begin to make healthy dietary changes in your home, I recommend that you have specific and clearly written mealtime expectations in plain sight for all family members to see. This effort creates some common language, understanding, and accountability regarding your family's wellness goals, and outlines healthy boundaries concerning acceptable behaviors and appropriate outcomes for all.

Our goal with this exercise is not just to create some order, however. Our primary long-term goal is to expose our children to new foods and encourage more adventurous eating. We want to broaden their palates and build food confidence so that they feel equipped to handle novel locations and situations where unfamiliar foods are offered. We want to afford them a certain amount of control over their meal and food choices, allowing more freedom as they master some basic skills, manners, and habits. We want to instill in them an appreciation for flavors and textures and the simple beauty of natural whole foods. This is not about control or manipulation. It is about creating goals and a path to achieve them.

Keep in mind that this process is just that – a process! It will be messy and awkward and downright exhausting at times, and that's okay! As parents we are swimming hard against a current that says food doesn't matter and that kids should be allowed to embrace their childhood by indulging in all kind of sugar-laden and processed foods. You might experience seasons of relative ease, particularly while children are young and oblivious to the many foods available to them, as well as seasons of frustration as teens become more independent and capable of securing whatever foods they desire, in any amount and at any time. Recognize that seasons don't last and that you can only do your best to instill healthy habits and an understanding of good nutrition while they are within your care. **Above all, remember that you are not responsible for WHAT your children eat. You are responsible for WHAT IS PROVIDED for them to eat.**

### Your Assignment

Keep copies of the **Mealtime Expectations Chart** in the kitchen and maybe even tape to the back of each of their chairs or place beside their plates. Mom or Dad helps each child complete their own chart at the end of the meal (we typically did it a dinner time) and discuss any disagreements in scoring. Give it a test run over a weekend, and explain that you might decide to tweak some things before doing it for real.

Try the actual challenge for 1-3 weeks and note what progress you observe. After a few successful weeks, or once you feel everyone has established some healthier habits, take a break for a while. If and when you feel things are slipping, pull out the chart again, make any updates or changes, and embark on another 1-3 week challenge.

I am attaching a sample that we have used very successfully with our 3 kids (ages 8, 6, and 4 at the time). In fact, I'm thinking right now that it might be time to do it again! Feel free to use these items, come up with your own, or mix and match based on your children's weak areas and your own needs.

**Positive Words:** When talking about our food, we always use positive words. For example: "I like having a chance to try something new! This is yummy! Mom and dad, I like this meal." If there is something about your food that you do not like, you can: 1. Remain quiet about it, or 2. Express your feelings in a respectful and positive way. For example: "I'm glad I tried this broccoli. I wonder if I might like it better with a little more salt and butter next time." At no time is fussing or complaining about our food permitted.

**Hands & Feet:** We keep our hands to ourselves at all times and our feet under the table.

**Toilet & Wash Hands:** *Before* we come to the dinner table, we use the restroom and wash our hands with soap and water.



**3 Green Bites:** We take 3 “big kid bites” of something green on our plate.

**1 New Food:** We take at least one bite of a new food whenever it is offered because this is an adventure and our taste buds need lots of opportunities to like new things!

**Bus Dishes:** Each child, as he or she is able, buses their own plates to the sink after the meal.

**Parent Choice:** This can be whatever habit or action Mom or Dad feels needs to be addressed at this particular meal. It can be the same each day, or it can change. Some things we have used: 1. Thank mom and dad for your meal before you ask to be excused from the table. 2. Chew with your mouth closed. 3. Use your napkin to wipe your hands and face.

### Point System

Each child earns a point for successful performance in each area, with 7 being the maximum. Notice that some of these expectations are relatively easy for most children to achieve, and others will present more of a challenge. Consider the age and maturity of your children when designing your expectations – you want each of them to be able to experience success, but also be stretched in some respects also.

Mom and Dad agree upon an appropriate outcome for each range of scores. We use TV and bedtime in this regard because very often - poor behavior and attitude at dinner means someone is tired and cranky and needs extra rest. It is an immediate and appropriate consequence of their dinnertime *behavior* and *attitude*, not a reward or punishment for *how much* they ate. Whatever you choose, make sure you are prepared to enforce the rules immediately and consistently. That’s where the magic happens! Also, I highly recommend that you do not tie consequences to desserts or special food treats. One disclaimer: We do make occasional exceptions to this challenge when someone is not feeling well or has just had a really rough day. Use your good judgment.

Of course, if we are going to require new habits from our children, it is only fair that something be required of us as well. To engage your children further, explain that Mom and Dad will have a checklist also. Maybe they can have the privilege of “grading” you! Feel free to adjust the wording for the age of your kids. Some possible habits to include:

1. We will consistently and calmly remind you of the mealtime expectations, but we will not threaten or manipulate or yell.
2. We will make sure each of you has an opportunity to add to the mealtime conversation.
3. We will put at least one food on your plate that is *familiar*.
4. We will put at least one *new* food on your plate.
5. We will serve at least one (green) vegetable with the meal.
6. We will respect your decision to not eat everything on your plate.
7. We will request and implement your input for future healthy meal ideas.

### A Note About Older Children

This exercise is mostly geared for children ages 3 – 12. If your children have already reached their teen years, you will need to adjust this exercise to something that is more age-appropriate. I’ve already begun giving this some thought and will be working on a different exercise more suitable for that age group. If you have tried and true methods of encouraging healthier food habits for your teens and would like to share them with me, please feel free to contact me at any of my social media handles:

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# MEALTIME CHALLENGE

	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
Positive Words							
Hands & Feet							
Toilet/Wash Hands							
3 Green Bites							
1 New Food							
Bus dishes							
Parent choice							

6-7 Points = 7:30 Bedtime

4-5 Points = 7:15 Bedtime

<4 Points = No TV, 7:00 bedtime

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