

PRACTICING COURTESY AT FAMILY DINNER



Food

Take advantage of summer berries to make an easy dessert with a not-so-courteous name!



Fun

Model kindness and positivity with a round of “20 Things I Love About...” For a twist on the challenge, list 20 Things you love about each person at the table!



Conversation

Try this question to open a conversation about the value of listening.



Courtesy seems to be a big topic these days. Whether it's mourning a seeming decline of social graces like shaking hands and holding doors, fretting about lack of civility in conversations or sighing over the way communication seems to have moved towards digital rather than face-to-face interactions, almost everyone you talk to probably has some opinion to share about the role of common courtesy in our everyday lives.

July happens to be National Cell Phone Courtesy Month, and that puts us in mind of all the different ways that the family dinner table can be used to practice courtesy — not just technological, but of all kinds. Here are our top tips for making the dinner table a civilized place to be this month, even if there are elbows sharing space with your plates!

Be Clear And Realistic About Expected Manners

Good table manners are a lovely goal, but few of us are born ready to be model guests at Buckingham Palace. Consider developing manners a journey rather than a set of expected behaviors that have to be perfect every night. It helps to be realistic about your family's ages and stages — what's acceptable from a 3-year old will be different from what your 10-year-old can do, and what helps a child with ADHD participate positively in family dinners may differ from what you might expect from another child their age.

Not sure where to start? We encourage you to begin with the behaviors that are really about showing courtesy and kindness to others. For example:

- Saying "please" and "thank you"
- Asking to have dishes passed, and passing them nicely
- Not reaching across others' plates
- Not interrupting when others are speaking

These skills, and others like them, translate well from the dinner table to other social situations, making them good ones to master before you move on to meal-specific manners like napkins in laps and using forks instead of fingers. (Though those are important skills, too!)

For more on manners, check out [Rules, Rules, Rules](#) or [May I be Excused, Please?](#)

Model Good Conversational Skills

Taking turns while speaking and using respectful language are a strong foundation for showing courtesy in a conversation, but they're only the beginning. Especially as kids get older, it's important to teach them how to handle some of the more difficult aspects of communication. If they disagree with someone, how can they express that politely? How should they engage with someone in a respectful dialogue if they don't agree, and stay open-minded to the other's point of view? If someone says something offensive, what's the best way to handle the situation? All of these are challenges that come up frequently in adult conversations, and the dinner table is a great place to help your whole family develop their skills in dealing with tricky conversations.

Try starting with our Guidelines for Meaningful Conversation, and see if your family can stick

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/practicing-courtesy-family-dinner/>

with these courtesies:

Practice Positivity: No name-calling or complaints! Try to choose topics that make people open up instead of shutting down.

Listen to Understand, Not to Respond: Show active listening with eye contact and open body language. Ask yourself “Am I hearing the feelings or meaning behind their words?”

Reframe with Respect: If you hear something concerning, try to investigate first. Say “I think I just heard you say...” and restate. Or ask “I’m curious about...” or “Can you explain what you meant by....?”

Welcome People, Not Arguments: If a conversation becomes heated, try saying “I hear you, and I am open to talking about this more later. For now, can we try to enjoy each other’s company? Let’s talk about something else while we cool off.”

Get Everyone Involved: Make sure that everyone at the table has a chance to participate. If someone seems particularly quiet, try asking them a direct question or offering a compliment so they feel included, or invite them to suggest a new conversation topic.

Share a Smile: Whether it’s a literal smile on your face, a warm gesture or a joke or silly story, it’s important to know (and learn when to use) some strategies to help keep tension at bay.

Get more in-depth ideas for making the most of conversation with Dr. Anne Fishel’s tips on [Creating Meaningful Conversations](#).

Set Tech Boundaries That Work For You

Whether it’s cell phones, tablets, computers or television, managing technology at the table can create a tricky etiquette situation. Some families may choose to go entirely device-free at dinner to avoid the problem altogether, but that may not be the solution that works best for your mealtimes. If tech is a potential guest at your dinner table, we encourage you to use it mindfully, especially as you’re working to model courtesy this month!

Try these tips to help find the boundaries that are right for you:

Put devices in their place. Try creating a holding area where digital devices can be placed during your meal, so you only reach for them when necessary rather than checking them throughout dinner.

Use devices to promote conversation and togetherness, not distract from them. For example, you might use your phone to look up the answer to a question or to remember a funny joke you wanted to share, but not use it to play Words With Friends while some one is trying to talk to you.

Stick to communicating with the people who are present. Unless there’s an emergency

and you have to take a call or text, show courtesy to those at the table by trying not to carry on a separate digital conversation while you're eating.

Schedule dinners with devices, and those without. For example, you might try one dinner per week without technology, or if device-free is more the norm for you, allow Friday night movies during mealtime.

Having trouble setting boundaries? Check out the [Technology Tips](#) from our 4-Week Program for better family dinners.

Teach “Soft Skills”

We love the tips in [this article from our friends at Common Sense Media](#) about reinforcing “soft skills” like kindness, empathy and courtesy. If you do try that Friday night movie with your dinner, you might use some of their ideas about choosing media that reinforces the messages you want your family to learn.

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE MCGRATH FAMILY

Meet the McGrath family! Mom Narelle is handling dinnertime solo while her husband, Richard, is out of the country for a few months. We checked in to see how mealtimes are going.

The Family:

Narelle and Richard McGrath, of Sydney, Australia. The McGraths have four kids, ages 15, 13, 10 and 10.

The Goal:

With dad Richard away for several months, Narelle has a simple goal: To consistently gather the family for meals every night and promote togetherness at dinnertime, even when it feels stressful.

The Challenges:

Like many families we've learned from over the years, the McGraths struggle to balance the desire to eat dinner together against the lures of conflicting activities for the kids and the temptation of screen time. When it's not the schedule that competes with meals in the McGrath household, it's the kids' desire to watch television rather than hang out together at the table that can be frustrating for Narelle.

The Strategies:

While she's managing dinnertime on her own, Narelle has implemented a few key strategies to make family meals less stressful and more

rewarding for everyone. First, she says, she gives the kids a hand in the preparations by having them cook the meal or set the table in a special way. Secondly, she ensures that staying at the table together is a meaningful experience by choosing a book to read together. Currently the family is preparing for a big move to New Zealand, so Narelle has chosen a biography that's based in New Zealand for their dinner table read-aloud.

The Food:

Favorite meals in the McGrath household include lasagna, barbecue and rice paper rolls.

The Takeaway:

Narelle says that connecting with The Family Dinner Project has been helpful in reminding her that “What I'm already doing is okay...even if some days it feels pretty raw.” She also finds that the games and conversation starters can be an inspiration to lighten the mood at the table on evenings when getting there has been more of a struggle than usual.

The Best Part:

Aside from the draw of “yummy food,” the McGraths appreciate the opportunity for conversation — especially when it becomes “fun, stimulating or encouraging.”



A “fool” is a dessert of whipped cream and fruit. Jam makes it easy to make and customize to your taste. For added crunch, top your fool with crumbled cookies or toasted nuts.



Strawberry Fool

Serves 4

Ingredients:

1/2 cup strawberry jam
1 1/4 cups heavy cream
1 Tbsp. granulated sugar
1 cup fresh strawberries

Instructions:

1. In a large bowl, beat the heavy cream with the sugar until stiff peaks form.
2. In a small bowl, whisk the jam until smooth; fold into the whipped cream.
3. Spoon into serving bowls and garnish with the strawberries.



20 THINGS I LOVE ABOUT...

Come up with a topic together – or put some ideas in a jar and pull out one randomly. Examples include a season or a person or place, or anything really! Then go around the table and have everyone name something silly or serious they love about that season or person or place until you have twenty items. Make sure to write everything down so you can have fun looking at it a month, a year, or 20 years from now!

Contributed by Amy.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/20-things-love/>



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