

BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AT THE TABLE



Food

While you're baking for family fun this month, how about putting a little love into it with these heart-shaped tomato and cheese snacks?



Fun

Turn your time together in the kitchen into a challenging guessing game with this Blindfolded Smell Test.



Conversation

Start talking about healthy relationships with these conversation starters.



One of the dates we most associate with the month of February is Valentine's Day. But this month is also [Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month](#). That may not sound like a fun topic to bring up at the table, but we believe that celebrating love on February 14th and having a dialogue with your family about how to encourage and engage in healthy dating relationships can go hand-in-hand. The trick, especially with wary teens and tweens, is to get things started and then let them take the lead on how deep the conversation goes. And even if you have younger kids and don't have dating and romance on your radar yet, you can still work on building some strong foundations for the future at your dinner table. Here are some tips to help guide you in using family dinner as a place to encourage healthy relationships:

Model respect.

Even with very young children, the dinner table can be a place to reinforce common courtesies and respectful language, laying the groundwork for strong future relationships. Make sure to [banish any name-calling, teasing or rude language](#) (no small feat when sibling dynamics come into play!). And take a tip from our friend Rick Weissbourd of [Making Caring Common](#), who says that it can be just as valuable for kids to see us disagreeing with each other respectfully as it is for them to witness us being loving toward one another.

Demonstrate affection.

We're not recommending full-on PDA, especially if you want to keep your teenagers at the table instead of sending them fleeing in horror. But a quick peck while you help each other in the kitchen, a shoulder rub or reaching for your partner's hand at the table can all be easy ways to [model appropriate romantic behavior](#). Even non-physical actions like surprising each other with a little gift or making one another laugh are important ways to show kids what a warm, caring relationship looks like. If you are parenting solo, pointing out good examples of loving relationships among friends and family or regularly inviting good relationship role models to share a meal with you can be powerful ways to provide the same kind of messages in your home.

Use fiction.

As Rick Weissbourd notes, kids are more likely than not to have questions and thoughts about relationship dilemmas — but they might not always be comfortable opening up, especially if the dilemma involves themselves or some close friends. Watching TV or movies together can provide a buffer that makes kids more willing to talk, especially when you bring up observations about the on-screen relationships you're viewing. Naming both positive and negative dynamics you notice in fictional characters can

open up the lines of communication to help kids explore what they're thinking and feeling about real-life problems.

Try “What Would You Do?” scenarios.

Often, teens and tweens particularly enjoy being asked to solve hypothetical problems. Test out some “What Would You Do?” questions that get to the difficult relationship situations they might experience as they grow. For example, how would they handle it if they knew a friend was cheating on his girlfriend? Would they intervene if they suspected a friend was in an unsafe relationship, and how? What would they do if they thought someone might like them, and they wanted to explore the possibility of a relationship? If your kids are ready for a more intense conversation, try some of these [resources from our archives](#) on discussing consent and bystander behavior. Getting teens to think about how they'd behave in certain situations now can really pay off later, when they confront some of these challenges in real life.

JOIN IN A MONTH OF FAMILY BAKING FUN!

February is also National Bake for Family Fun Month, courtesy of our friends at the Home Baking Association. Enjoy some togetherness (and yummy treats!) with their [kid-friendly resources](#).

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REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE NORTH FAMILY

Meet the North family, from Western Massachusetts. The Norths are a pre-adoptive foster family dealing with ADHD, autism, and multiple food allergies while also using family dinner as a way to practice gratitude with their three young children.

Due to this family's special circumstances, we're publishing their story with all names and identifying details changed so that we can help them adhere to strict privacy guidelines related to their foster-to-adopt journey. We hope their insights into the unique challenges and joys of sharing family dinner with their three children will inspire other families!

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE NORTH FAMILY

The Family:

Fred and CJ North, of Western Massachusetts, and their three children: “Jazzy,” (5), “Bug” (3), and “Boop” (2). Grandma also often plays a role in the family’s daily life and dinners.

The Goal:

Among other things, the family is currently working on specific goals for the kids, to help build their independence and personal skills. Getting 5-year-old daughter Jazzy involved in dinnertime responsibilities is a big focus — she loves to help with food preparation and independently pour milk and water for herself and her brothers. She’s also gaining a sense of pride and accomplishment in her skills at making grilled cheese. CJ and Fred are hoping to help her channel her newfound responsibility into one day getting the dishes consistently cleared and actually make it to the sink!

The Challenge:

CJ shares that the family’s biggest dinner-time challenge is keeping the kids seated for the duration of the meal. The two older children have ADHD, and 3-year-old Bug is also on the autism spectrum. Sensory challenges and a need for constant movement make sitting at the table developmentally difficult for the kids. In addition, their impulsivity and high energy mean that Fred, CJ and Grandma have to be extra-vigilant in keeping everyone safe from hot surfaces and sharp objects during dinner preparations and throughout the meal. It can sometimes be difficult to get the food on the table safely while

managing behaviors, and keeping everyone engaged in dinner is a consistent challenge. “We’ve tried exercises prior to dinner, a wobble stool, booster seats of different heights and textures. But it is a rare occurrence to have all 5 or 6 family members seated at the same time!”

The Strategies:

As a pre-adoptive foster family contending with early childhood trauma, ADHD, autism and multiple food allergies, CJ and Fred have had to work harder than many families to come up with ways to make the dinner table a positive and rewarding environment for everyone. Since the family collectively has over a dozen serious food allergies plus the sensory difficulties that accompany Bug’s autism, eating at home is a medical necessity. Fred and CJ work with the kids on learning about “not hurting our bellies or bodies” as they work on acceptance of new, healthy and safe foods, which they say has really improved all three children’s willingness to try what is served.

To help manage behavioral and safety concerns at dinner, especially during food preparation and cooking when there’s a greater danger of exposure to heat and sharp objects, the family has established an arts and crafts time with individual storage spots for each child’s favorite supplies and space for their masterpieces. 2-year-old Boop especially benefits from inexhaustible supplies of stickers and reusable peel-and-stick books that can be available at the table to help occupy his busy fingers.

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Most important to the Norths, however, is ensuring that all of the children — biological siblings who entered the foster care system at birth and started entering the Norths' home 3.5 years ago — feel a sense of connection and belonging as a family. They started a Sunday night tradition of dinnertime “Appreciations” when their eldest daughter first came to them as a toddler, in the hope that it would help her connect to her new foster family. “Since change is inevitable and scary,” CJ shares, “we looked for a way to appreciate what we have.” The Sunday appreciations are the family’s intentional gratitude practice and begin with one family member looking at another and sharing something they appreciate about that person. “It can be time-consuming and sometimes the conversations get hijacked or take a turn, but inevitably it’s a funny and heart-warming experience. Fred and I have been shocked by the level of depth in the kids’ responses and how beautifully they see each other.” Sometimes the North kids share appreciation for something outside the family — like a recent expression of gratitude for gorillas — or are keen to express their gratitude for the family pets. Other times, they share sweet reminders of how commonplace experiences and items can have special meaning to young children. Bug, for example, appreciates how Fred lets him help clean the dryer lint trap! And CJ will always remember the night Jazzy said “Mommy, I appreciate you buying me pink cowgirl boots that match yours, so you and I can be the same. When they get too small, can you save them in the attic? Then when I

grow up and have a daughter, I will give them to her so we can all match!”

The Food:

Everyone in the North household agrees that dinnertime is best when it includes homemade soup and crusty garlic bread.

The Takeaway:

CJ and Fred have been fostering for 3.5 years, and awaiting an adoption date for 2 years. They share that “for a long time, everything was legally uncertain, and the rhythmic predictability of a nourishing dinner was a way to ground our children and ourselves in the steady comfort of family life. Knowing the abuse these children endured in utero and what may have happened if their lives had unfolded differently has been a sobering guide through simple pleasures like full bellies and silly stories at the table. Food wasn’t guaranteed and nutrition wasn’t reliable in their early development, but boy are they healthy eaters now!”

The Best Part:

CJ, Fred and Grandma appreciate the feeling of arriving home at the end of a hectic day, and find peace at the table where they can enjoy good food and hear about the kids’ days or plan a family excursion. As for the kids:

Jazzy: “Savoring the food!”

Bug: “Appreciations!”

Boop: “Noodles!”

Do you have your own family dinner project to share with us? We’d love to hear from you and consider featuring your family! [Contact Us.](#)



BEFORES & AFTERS TOMATO CHEESE HEARTS

This recipe originally appeared on [Red, Round or Green](#). To make a more traditional palmier, you can use thawed frozen puff pastry instead of phyllo dough brushed with olive oil — the hearts will be flakier and more buttery with puff pastry, crisper and lighter with phyllo.

Tomato Cheese Hearts

Makes 8 Hearts

Ingredients:

3 sheets phyllo dough, cut in half crosswise
3 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
3/4 cup diced sundried tomatoes
2 tablespoons grated parmesan cheese
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon dried basil
1/4 teaspoon garlic powder

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Lightly grease a baking sheet or line with parchment.
2. Combine the cheeses, sundried tomatoes, basil, salt, and garlic powder in a small bowl, tossing to mix thoroughly.
3. Lay one section of the phyllo dough out onto a flat surface and brush all over with olive oil. Stack another sec-

tion of dough on top, brush with olive oil, and continue with the remaining dough until you have six layers. Finish with phyllo dough – don't oil the top piece.

4. Sprinkle the tomato and cheese mixture evenly over the prepared phyllo dough. Beginning at one of the short ends, roll the pastry around the filling into a tight spiral, stopping when you reach the middle. Now repeat rolling from the other end, until the two spirals meet in the middle.

5. Using a very sharp knife, trim the ends of the roll to neaten them, then cut the roll crosswise into eight heart-shaped pieces about 1/2 inch thick each. Lay the hearts on the prepared baking sheet and gently reshape them as needed.

6. Bake at 400 degrees for 15-20 minutes, until golden brown and crisp.



BLINDFOLDED SMELL TEST

Contributed by [Anne Fishel, Ph.D](#)

Set up small jars with cinnamon, lemon, toothpaste, banana, other spices in your kitchen, yogurt and/or whatever else you have on hand. Blindfold your family members and have them guess the ingredients!

This idea is adapted from Anne Fishel's forthcoming book, Home for Dinner: Mixing Food, Fun, and Conversation for Healthier Families and Happier Kids, due out in January 2015.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/blindfolded-smell-test-2/>



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION TALK ABOUT: RELATIONSHIPS



What do you think are the ideal characteristics for a life partner or spouse?

How does someone act when they are "in love"?

What do you think is the difference between love and romance?

Do you believe in love at first sight?

Can you think of some examples from books, TV, or movies of healthy and unhealthy relationships?

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/building-healthy-relationships-at-the-table/>