

# How to Help Kids Develop Courage



## Food

Build confidence in the kitchen by showing kids how to use a vegetable peeler to make this colorful salad.



## Fun

Help kids show courage by turning “failure” into a celebration with this goofy game!



## Conversation

Get the courageous conversation flowing with these questions about bravery.



When asked what qualities they'd most like to see their children develop, parents often list courage or bravery among the top ten. It's easy to see why: it seems as though anxiety is on the rise among both kids and adults. Increasingly, parents share their worries about kids who are too scared to sleep alone, go to school, climb to the top of the tallest playground slide, learn to swim, try a new activity, or any number of other rites of passage. We don't know for sure what's causing all this anxiety, but it's clear that for many families, building courage is an important topic.

What does that have to do with family dinners? Well, for starters, the family dinner table is one of our most reliable daily opportunities to get a "temperature check" on our kids. By sitting down to a meal together, parents and kids get the necessary face-to-face contact to be able to tell whether someone's feeling down, unusually tired or seeming as though they have a lot on their minds. It's a perfect chance to check in on whether kids are overwhelmed or anxious, and to find out if something is worrying them.

Family dinner also gives parents a place to teach lessons and reinforce skills and ideals for their kids. Just by being together and combining food, fun and conversation, you can help kids develop character traits like resilience, empathy and yes, even bravery. Here are some ways to build up courage through your family dinners:

- **Try new things.** It may seem like a small thing, but taking tiny risks — like trying new foods — can help kids feel braver and more confident about stepping outside their comfort zones. If you have reluctant eaters, you might start slowly, with baby steps like encouraging them to allow you to put a new food on the corner of their plate (without a requirement to taste it). Or explore smelling or touching a new food before tasting, and praise their bravery for each new step. With more adventurous eaters, let them explore the produce aisle or farmer's market for unusual items they want to taste, or make a list of foods they've always wanted to try and figure out a plan to make the wish a reality. Do they want to get daring with something spicy? Try an ethnic cuisine you've never heard of before? Encourage their explorations and expand your horizons together.
- **Talk about courage and risk-taking.** One great way to get kids thinking about how bravery shows up in their own lives is to share your own stories. Tell them about the time you took a big risk in middle school, or when you're talking about your day at work, try using language that reflects courage. "I was so nervous to talk to my boss about what had happened, but I decided that I could take a deep breath and be brave...."

You can also share examples of courageous people from the news or from history, or ask kids to talk about book and movie characters who are brave and how those characters show courage. Encourage thinking and talking about bravery as a wide range of actions, too; it's not only the knight slaying the dragon who's brave, but also the shy kid who gets up and gives a presentation in front of his class. Courage takes all different forms!

- **Model caring for others.** Researchers have found that kids whose parents expect them to help those in need are more likely to show courage in a variety of situations. Share ways you've stuck your neck out for someone else, and ask kids "How have you helped someone this week?" You can also use the dinner table as a place to make plans to volunteer or help others as a family; our Giving Decision Tree is a great place to start if you're not sure how to begin brainstorming about a family service project.
- **Show them how to balance risk and safety.** It's easier to be brave when you feel confident that you can handle the task at hand. Since it's not possible to remove all danger from every situation, kids need to be shown how to assess risks and make a plan to avoid unnecessary threats. Cooking together is an ideal activity to help demonstrate those skills! Have kids join you in the kitchen and show them how to manage age-appropriate cooking tasks safely. They'll learn how to confidently handle everyday risks like using peelers, kitchen shears and eventually knives, how to avoid injury by using potholders and keeping fingers away from heat sources, and how to know when something is too difficult and dangerous for them to try without an adult's help.

Gaining courage isn't as easy as following a yellow brick road and asking a wizard for help, so be patient with your kids along the journey. Celebrate the small steps towards increased bravery, and be sure to praise effort rather than results. You may find you even start feeling a bit more bold yourself!

## REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE NELSON FAMILY

*We first met the Nelsons, a military family, at a Community Dinner event for Blue Star Families at Hanscom Air Force Base in Massachusetts. They are now living abroad and sharing their family dinner wisdom and challenges from halfway around the world!*



### THE FAMILY: THE NELSONS

Eric and Heather Nelson and kids Ethan (9), Kailey (8), Cade (6) and Sienna (2). The Nelsons currently live in Yokosuka, Japan.

### THE GOAL:

As a military family, the Nelsons can appreciate the value of time spent together. They've lived abroad for 6.5 out of the last 7.5 years, meaning that their strength as a family unit is a top priority. For Heather and Eric, keeping the bonds strong means sitting down together for a meal every night.

*"We move every 2-3 years and live far away from extended family, and because of that it is so important that we do family dinners so that we have that closeness as a family, because we have to rely on each other so much."*

### THE CHALLENGE:

Even though they live abroad, the challenges for this family are very similar to those of families here in the States! Heather says that structuring the family schedule to allow them all to sit down to dinner together each night can be tricky, and additionally, getting a healthy dinner on the table on the busiest evenings is a continual work in progress. However, as a military family, the Nelsons also face an additional challenge:

*"My husband occasionally deploys - for example next year he will be out to sea for 5-6 months and it will be difficult for me (and has been in the past when he has been gone) to be motivated to cook dinner and not just make the kids mac and cheese, but realize more than ever how we will need family dinners to deal with the stress of my husband being gone."*

### THE STRATEGIES:

Heather says that when it comes to making sure they eat dinner together, she simply has to make time — either structuring the kids' activities and schedules so they don't interfere with the dinner hour, or if that's not possible, adjusting the family's dinnertime so that everyone is available to sit down and eat. She also enlists the kids' help to make dinners happen. "I want my kids to eat healthy and enjoy trying new foods, so each week, they take turns planning out a meal for dinner and then helping me prepare it," she says. Heather notes that being involved in the planning and cooking has taught each of her children valuable lessons about nutrition and life skills.

*"They are more willing to try new foods when they're the ones cooking it. They have also learned about balancing our meals...they have become excited about cooking and always want to look on Pinterest or in cookbooks for new recipes."*

### THE FOOD:

Because of the family's international lifestyle, the Nelson kids have been exposed to a wide variety of foods and enjoy lots of Spanish and Japanese dishes that they've tried while living in those countries. Their list of favorite meals includes the Spanish cold soup gazpacho and Japanese specialty katsudon, along with more typically American choices like pancakes, clam chowder and steak rolls. Heather also shares that living abroad often means that they have to challenge themselves to cook certain cuisines at home — for example, the Nelson family loves Mexican food, but finds it hard to source in Yokosuka. "When we're really craving Mexican, we just make it ourselves!"

Try the Nelson family's favorite dinner:  
[Katsudon](#)

### THE TAKEAWAY:

The Nelsons say that their experience with The Family Dinner Project taught them to get their kids more involved in the meal preparation, which has had many benefits.

*"My children are much more engaged in what we eat, more curious about what is for dinner, and are always asking to help me in the kitchen."*

### THE BEST PART:

For this family, food is a big part of what makes family dinner enjoyable — the kids rate "Sitting down and eating" and "Trying new foods" as some of their favorite things about dinnertime. The whole family also agrees that the conversation, especially when Heather and Eric share stories from their own childhoods, makes the dinner table a special place for all six family members.

*"Eating dinner together is something we really look forward to and enjoy - one of the best parts of the day!!!"*

*If you have an interesting or inspiring family dinner story you'd like to share on our blog, let us know!*

## 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: THE MCGRATHS

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 CHALLENGE:

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.”

We wish the McGraths the best of luck in their upcoming move, and hope to hear more from this family as they establish dinners in their new home!

*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.*

### REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE TOWNSEND FAMILY

*This month, our featured family story is told through the perspective of an inspiring teen! Gabriela Rodriguez-Townsend was introduced to The Family Dinner Project through our work with FCCLA. We're pleased to feature Gabriela and her family in the month of February, with a special nod to Gabriela's own personal service project, which uses family dinners as a platform to help other teens learn about healthy relationships.*



### THE FAMILY: THE TOWNSENDS

Gabriela Rodriguez-Townsend, 15; her parents; and siblings Anthony (19), Daniel (8) and Isabella (5). The Townsends live in Pflugerville, Texas.

### THE GOAL:

Gabriela says that the family's shared goal is to eat together and enjoy one another's company more often. Her philosophy is that family dinner should be “a priority, not a privilege.”

She's taking that a step further by working on a month-long service project at her high school, Project Love. Through workshops, hands-on projects and community involvement, Gabriela is teaching her classmates about ways to cultivate healthy relationships “whether it's a friend, sibling, parents, teacher, lover or a random person they meet.”

### THE CHALLENGE:

Within her own family, Gabriela says the biggest challenge is a familiar one for most busy families: just getting everyone together at the table! However, she has also recognized something happening among her peers that she hopes to tackle through her Project Love efforts. Citing an obsession with pop culture and general negative sentiment among her fellow teens as they grapple with world events and social media, Gabriela says:

*"The main thing that inspired me was the lack of qualitative relationships in my home, friendships and community. Week Four of Project Love has a theme of Family Connections, and I decided that since family is foundation, why not start together at the table?"*

### THE STRATEGIES:

To help her own family spend more time together at the table, Gabriela asks everyone in advance to help with dinner ideas, so there's no last-minute rush to figure out what to cook. She also says "My family dinners tend to be super short, so we try to use TFDP conversation starters to keep everyone wrangled in for a bit longer!"

As part of Project Love, Gabriela is teaching workshops to students at her school to help them bring a family dinner experience to their own homes. She's teaching other teens how to plan and prepare a simple meal, and providing conversation starters and additional recipes as a gift they can bring home to their families.

### THE FOOD:

The one meal that brings the whole Townsend family to the table in a hurry is their mom's special chili recipe!

### THE TAKEAWAY:

Gabriela says that she hopes that through Project Love, her classmates will learn from her that "to get respect, you have to give respect." She's inspired to pass that message along by her belief in the importance of family and her learnings from The Family Dinner Project.

*"Family is most definitely the foundation of any child's life. The Family Dinner Project showed me that to be successful in life, a bond with your family is important."*

### THE BEST PART:

For Gabriela, the best part of family dinners is being able to share her accomplishments with her family and receive their praise and support. She says her younger siblings enjoy the attention they get at the table for telling jokes, and her parents have developed an appreciation for the way family dinners keep her eldest brother close to home.

We congratulate Gabriela on her outstanding efforts in her school and community, and are proud to feature her and Project Love!

*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.*



*This recipe is easy to customize by tossing different combinations of vegetables in separate bowls. As for picky eaters, vegetables can be more fun to eat when they're served in a different shape. Here you use a vegetable peeler to shave long strips off the vegetables.*



### **Ribbon Salad**

Serves 4-6

#### **Ingredients:**

- 1/2 lb. carrots
- 1/2 lb. asparagus
- 1 bell pepper
- 1/2 cup parsley leaves, packed
- 1 clove garlic, smashed
- 1/2 tsp. kosher salt
- 2 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice
- 1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

#### **Instructions:**

1. Use a vegetable peeler to shave the carrots, asparagus and bell pepper into long strips. Combine in a large bowl.
2. In a food processor, blender or chopper, combine the parsley, garlic, salt and lemon juice. Blend, adding the olive oil slowly. Add salt to taste.
3. Toss the vegetables with the dressing.



This is a game designed to get kids comfortable with making and sharing mistakes. Nobody's perfect!

Each person takes a turn in the "spotlight." They stand up and proclaim, "Today I failed!" Then they share a brief story of either a real or made-up failure. For example, "Today I failed! I gave my Science homework to my English teacher and my English homework to my Science teacher!"

Once someone has shared their "failure" story, the rest of the people at the table shout, "Ta-Da!" and give them an enthusiastic round of applause. The storyteller takes a bow, acknowledges their fans, and then goes back to their seat.

The audience now guesses whether the "failure" was real or made up. The idea is that whether the mistake was real or imagined, it's okay to admit it and share it with others, without receiving judgment for it. Parents: for this game to work well, you have to commit to not commenting on any real mistakes your kids share during the game. No follow-up questions, consequences or problem-solving on the spot. Just applaud and thank them for sharing!

If you feel you absolutely must follow up about anything you hear, choose a time later, away from the dinner table, and try an opening line like "Do you want any help with that homework situation?" or "I was wondering if you might be comfortable sharing more about that problem with your teacher." The more kids feel they can trust you to hear about their missteps without a negative response, the more relaxed and open they'll become about communicating with you in the future.

Get the courageous conversation flowing with these questions about bravery.



## RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

### TALK ABOUT: COURAGE



What does it mean to be brave?

Can you think of a person you consider to be very courageous? What are some ways they show courage?

Tell us about a time when you had to do something brave. What was that like? What helped you to be brave?

Courage doesn't always look like a big, bold action. Can you think of small, everyday acts that represent bravery?

What might help you to step outside your comfort zone and be brave this week?

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