

# Top Tips From Our New Book

## FUN

### HOW TO PLAY

Before dinner, each family member writes down the names of five people they admire on five separate pieces of paper. These people can be fictional characters, historical figures, people you know personally, or people you have never met. Mix up all the pieces of paper in a bowl and place this bowl on the table during dinner. Each family member takes a turn drawing a name from the bowl and describes this person to the rest of the family. The only rule is that the "describer" cannot say the person's name or any part of the name. Once the person is identified, try to guess who put this name in the bowl. Talk about why the person picked from the salad bowl is admirable.

### CONVERSATION

Politics and world events might feel too heavy for dinner conversation to Aditi's teenage son, but the family can still have meaningful conversations. These questions bring the conversation down from world news to what's right in your own backyard.

(AGES 8-14, 16-100)

- What does "norm" mean to you?
- If you've lived in more than one place: When someone asks where you came from, how do you answer? For example, is it where you live currently, where you grew up, or the part of the world where your ancestors lived?
- What would make you want to leave a place that you call home?
- How important are surroundings in creating a feeling of being home? What about the people who are there with you?
- If you could change one thing about your home, physically or otherwise, what would it be?



## GO BEYOND "HOW WAS YOUR DAY?"

"It's like I'm talking to myself!" Claire, a Connecticut parent of twin third graders and a kindergarten, remarked dryly. "I ask how the day was. 'Fine.' Did they learn anything? Of course not. Apparently, they go to school all day every day and do nothing, learn nothing, and talk to no one!"

If Claire's experience sounds familiar, take heart. The problem often lies with the conversation prompts, not the children! Certainly there are going to be nights when members of the family come to the table grumpy, more tired, or less sociable than others. The trouble is, "How was your day?" is the kind of conversational opener that isn't likely to inspire anyone, least of all a kid who's had a rough day and isn't sure how—or if—they'll open up about it.

Get around the one-word answers with some better conversation starters. Help everyone relax and enjoy dinner by serving up a fast but comforting crowd-pleaser. Then pair the meal with a memory-teasing game that's sure to get kids involved in the meal, even if they're in a less than talkative mood.

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## FOOD

Liven up the family dinner staples of chicken and rice with these easy, time-tested, and family-approved recipes that will get dinner on the table in under 90 minutes. Any remaining tension at your dinner table will surely melt away when you finish the meal with old-fashioned low-cream candies.

### LIGHTNING FAST LEMON PEPPER CHICKEN

Cooking instructor April Swanson of April's Kitchen Creations (@aprilskitchencreations) shared this recipe, which pairs sticky with simply sweetened broccolini or a big salad for a fast and tasty dinner.

**INGREDIENTS**  
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts  
3 tablespoons olive oil, divided  
Coarse salt and black pepper  
1/4 cup white wine, chicken broth, or water  
Zest and juice of 1 lemon  
1 tablespoon cold butter (optional)

**INSTRUCTIONS**  
Cut the chicken breasts into thin cutlets. Place the boneless chicken breast halves on a cutting board and mash the top with the heel of your hand, working your fingertips up to they are out of the way. Using a long sharp knife, carefully cut each into three thin cutlets. If this method is daunting to you, you can also cut each piece of chicken in thirds and use a meat mallet to gently pound the pieces into cutlets.

Brush the chicken cutlets on both sides with 2 tablespoons of the olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper.

Heat the remaining tablespoon of olive oil in a large heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken cutlets in a single layer. (Depending on the size of your skillet, this may have to be done in batches. It is best not to crowd the chicken.)

Turn after 2-3 minutes, when the chicken is light golden.

Cook the second side for another couple of minutes until the chicken is just cooked through. Remove the chicken to a platter and turn the heat off.

Add the wine or broth, lemon zest, and lemon juice to the hot skillet. Gently scrape any browned bits into the sauce.

Whisk in the butter, if desired, for a silky sauce. Serve the chicken with the sauce.

### CHICKEN RICE

Plain white rice gets a flavor boost from poultry seasoning, making it the perfect partner for a chicken dinner.

**INGREDIENTS**  
2 cups long-grain white rice  
4 cups chicken stock  
1 tablespoon butter  
1 1/2 teaspoons poultry seasoning

**INSTRUCTIONS**  
Combine the rice, chicken stock, and butter in a large saucepan. Cover tightly, bring to a boil, and reduce the heat to low.  
Cook the rice over low heat for 20-25 minutes (or according to the package directions for your rice) until the liquid is absorbed and the rice is cooked. Stir in the salt and poultry seasoning. Adjust the salt level to taste and serve.



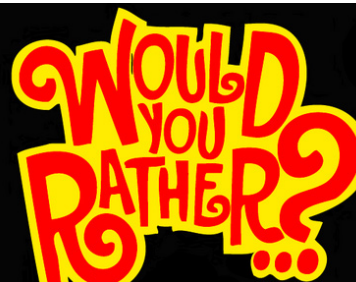
## Food

Chicken Noodle Lettuce Wraps are the first recipe in our new book. They're fast and easy to make!



## Fun

"Would You Rather?" is the most popular game on our site. It has stood the test of time!



## Conversation

Check out this sneak peek of some of the conversation starters included in *Eat, Laugh, Talk!*

### CONVERSATION

Though it's hard, try to remember that picky eating in children is often only partly about the food. More often it stems from a desire for kids to take control and make their own choices. We developed these conversation starters with the concept of choice in mind.

After many months of hard work and anticipation, we're proud to announce that our new book is finally available online and in stores!

*Eat, Laugh, Talk: The Family Dinner Playbook* contains 52 weeks of family-friendly recipes, games and conversation starters to make family dinners easy and attainable. Better yet, the book is a collection of stories and tips from real families who have found ways to overcome common mealtime challenges that are familiar to so many of us: Picky eating, time pressures, tension at the table, distractions and other tricky dinner situations. We're thrilled to finally be able to share all of this fantastic family dinner inspiration with the world!

As a sneak preview, here are just a few of the great tips shared in *Eat, Laugh, Talk*:

- **Got picky eaters?** Jacqui's been there, and she lets her kids take control by making their own alternate meal if they don't like what's served. Elizabeth and Trampus have also dealt with picky eaters, and work around preferences by making sure to always serve at least one accepted food at every meal.
- **What if you're just too busy?** Katie and Justine have both found success by swapping family dinner for family breakfasts. Heather and Eric sometimes rely on tech to stay connected for meals, while Beth and Gary have an unwritten household rule: No one eats alone.
- **What about all the planning, shopping, prep, cleanup...?** Balance the workload by starting a freezer swap with friends or rotating households for dinner, like Sana's family and many others we've met. Or get the whole family involved in cooking and cleaning up, especially if you have teens; Kathy and her family know how to get them into the kitchen with simple recipes for beginning cooks!
- **How can you ditch the distractions?** Try keeping everyone focused on the conversation with a conversation ritual like the "pass-the-candle" technique Susan and Rich use with their family. Or bring games to the table, like Denise and her daughter. Limit digital distractions with some suggestions from Sheri's household, or bring books and movies to life at the table, like Narelle and Scott.

- **What if everyone's just too tense to enjoy dinner?** Try learning a new dinner-related skill together, as Mary, Andrew and Maggie did when they learned to make homemade sushi. Or compromise on talking about sensitive topics, like Mark and Jackie did with their teenagers.

With dozens of family stories and hundreds of recipes, conversation ideas and adaptable games for all ages, *Eat, Laugh, Talk* is a collection of some of our best family dinner resources, all laid out in an easy-to-follow format. We hope you'll love the book and use the tips at your own family dinners for years to come!

## REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE ROBBINS FAMILY

Meet the Robbins family! Christopher is the founder of Familius Publishing, the company behind our new book *[“Eat, Laugh, Talk: The Family Dinner Playbook.”](#)*



### THE FAMILY: THE ROBBINS

Christopher and Michele Robbins of Sanger, CA, and their kids: Konnor, Taylor, Kienan, Cameron, Joshua, Sarah, Christian, Elizabeth, and Mariam. The kids range in age from 9 to 27.

### THE GOAL:

Christopher says, “Our goals are pretty simple—to broaden our children’s culinary horizons, have them eat real food, and take time together.” The family prioritizes teaching each child how to use cookbooks and follow recipes, and often incorporates foods from around the world to help expand their horizons. For example, two of the Robbins kids have spent time in Brazil, so cooking traditional Brazilian dishes together has helped the whole family learn more about the people, land and culture.

In addition to cooking and exploring new foods and ideas together, Christopher and Michele try to use family dinner as an opportunity to teach their kids about the importance of civil debate and discussion. “It’s important to us to have the kids learn to seek first to understand, and then to be understood,” they say. With younger children, the family models good conversational skills by reminding everyone to take turns and listen without interrupting.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/real-family-dinner-projects-robbins-family/>



As the kids grow, the lessons deepen, and the family might debate a specific topic to help everyone learn how to see different sides of an argument. The table in the Robbins household is

*“the boardroom of the family...a great place to discuss issues that need discussion, whether family issues or even global issues that help us see how we can help or engage in making the world a better place.”*

### THE CHALLENGE:

With such a large family, the Robbins experience a logistical challenge: Collecting everyone and getting them all to the kitchen at the same time!

### THE STRATEGIES:

Fortunately, Christopher and Michele have worked out a system that helps keep everyone involved in family meals, so there's less tendency to wander away. (*“Though they do...and we go find them and bring them back!”*) Everyone has a job to do, whether it's setting the table, pouring water, or helping to cook the weekly Sunday spaghetti dinner.

And after the meal is done, the family rule is that everyone stays together until the kitchen is clean and the work is finished. But the Robbins family makes the whole process, from meal prep through cleanup, fun and engaging.

*“While we're engaged in doing the dinner prep or cleaning activity, the kids all talk and have fun. We're a musical family so there are usually a few of us singing some song from a musical!”*

### THE FOOD:

*“We like salad. Everybody fights over the last bit of salad. No idea why, but I do make a great salad. The secret is in my dressing: crumbled blue cheese, avocado, Lawry's salt, olive oil and red wine vinegar. It's really good.”*

### THE TAKEAWAY:

Family dinner, for the Robbins family, is both a tradition and a rite of passage.

*“For almost thirty years we've made homemade meals and had the children work right beside us, even at a young age. From the time they are very young, they know how to read a recipe and cook basic foods. My mother taught me that if I could read a recipe, I could make whatever I wanted whenever I wanted. The children now see that same opportunity. Feel like a smoothie? Go make a smoothie. Feel like some chocolate chip cookies? Go make some chocolate chip cookies. Feel like making a chef salad? Go make a chef salad. I like that my kids use cooking as one of the first ways to begin their independence.”*

### THE BEST PART:

Christopher says he loves the first bite of a carefully prepared meal, and the “yummy noises” some of the kids make at that moment. “That's a satisfying moment,” he says, adding that the family loves dessert and enjoy finishing their meals with homemade pies, ice creams, brownies or cookies. And it's all made sweeter by the singing and chatter that accompany the group effort to cook and clean up!



*These Asian-inspired wraps are quick and easy to make, thanks to the use of rice noodles. We call for mushrooms and carrots in the recipe, but you can use your family's favorites or provide a variety of toppings so everyone at the table can customize their own lettuce wraps!*



### Chicken Noodle Lettuce Wraps

Serves 4-6

#### Ingredients:

- 1 head romaine lettuce
- 2 Tbsp. coconut oil
- 1 1/2 lb. boneless, skinless chicken, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 12 oz. mushrooms, sliced
- 1/4 c. soy sauce or tamari
- 2 Tbsp. honey
- 4 oz. brown rice noodles (mei fun)
- 1 c. shredded carrots

#### Instructions:

1. Heat coconut oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and garlic and saute until the chicken starts to turn opaque.
2. Add the mushrooms, stir, and continue to saute until the chicken is fully cooked, about 8 minutes.
3. While the chicken is cooking, place the rice noodles in a large bowl and pour boiling water over them until they're fully covered. Cover the bowl and allow the noodles to steep in the water until they're cooked, about 5 minutes. Drain.
4. Whisk the soy sauce and honey together and pour over the chicken mixture. Add the cooked noodles and toss to combine.
5. Fill individual lettuce leaves with the chicken and noodle mixture. Top with shredded carrots.



Take turns asking “Would you rather...?” questions. You can make up your own, but here are a few of our favorites:






- sweat melted cheese or always smell skunk?
- be able to fly or be invisible?
- speak every language in the world or play every instrument?
- live in the future or in the past?
- be the best player on a losing team or the worst player on a winning team?
- live in the city or the country?
- walk the Great Wall of China or Amazon River?
- live without a telephone or a television?
- be fabulously famous and poor or unknown and rich?
- win an Academy Award or an Olympic Gold Medal?
- have to eat a bowl full of crickets or a bowl full of worms?
- lose your sense of taste or your sense of smell?
- raise chickens for eggs or sheep for wool?
- live on a houseboat or in an RV?
- have feet for hands or hands for feet?
- shoot spaghetti out of your fingers or sneeze meatballs?
- always have to enter rooms backwards or always have to somersault out?
- have a unicorn horn or a squirrel tail?

Check out this sneak peek of some of the conversation starters included in *Eat, Laugh, Talk!*

## CONVERSATION

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(AGES: 2-13)

-  If you could choose different names for your pets or stuffed animals, what would you suggest?
-  If you did the grocery shopping, what would you choose to buy?
-  What are three things you have to do every day, whether you like it or not? What would happen if you chose not to do those things?
-  If you could eat only one food for the rest of your life, what food would you choose? Why is it important that we eat more than just our one or two favorites all the time?
-  Have you ever made a decision that you wished you could go back and change later? What was it? What different choice would you have made?

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