

# Dinnertime Discipline

Put an end to mealtime oh-no-you-don'ts and raise kids who will be welcome at any table.

by NANCY RONES

**I**n the short time it takes for me to put all the dishes out and join my children at the table, my 7-year-old will already have given new meaning to the words *graphic tee*. Ketchup smeared across the front of his shirt is never a surprise, nor is his saucy mouth being wiped across his sleeve. Let's face it: Every child is a dinner-table nightmare until taught some manners, but with our often frantic lives it's just not happening. "We're eating in shifts or in the car. The opportunities to sit down to a meal together, where manners are taught and practiced, are getting lost," says Amber Tankersley, Ph.D., associate professor of early-childhood development at Pittsburg State University, in Kansas. If you've had enough of the burping, slurping, and sloppy stains, dig into these genius ideas for taming rude table manners—and you won't have to sweat the big holiday meals ahead.

## THE GOAL **using a napkin, not his shirt, to wipe hands**

"When a child constantly wipes messy hands on his clothes, it's probably an unconscious move," says Christine Carter, Ph.D., a parent coach and author of *Raising Happiness*. "He just wants quick relief from the food gunk."

**HOW TO GET THERE** Start by offering a reward that your child will be stoked about. "When one of my sons was into washable tattoos, I'd let him choose a cool tattoo for his arm if he could get through dinner without using his sleeve," says family physician Deborah Gilboa, M.D., founder of AskDoctorG.com and mom of four boys ages 5 to 11. Or begin a family "Golden Napkin Award." Bestow a gold-colored (yellow will do) paper napkin on the member who goes a week without any admonishments.

Here's another trick you may not have tried: shirtless dinners! His sleeve or other favorite wiping spot is no longer available, so he'll need to reach

for that napkin, notes Dr. Gilboa. If he goes for his pants instead, take those off too! (Obviously this is something you do only at home and until your child gets with the program.)

## THE GOAL **giving compliments, not "yucks," to the chef**

Picky eating is epidemic among young kids and considering a cook's feelings doesn't come naturally, so it's hard for them to hold back on sharing exactly what they are thinking. "Social graces aren't automatic, so you have to model and teach them nicer ways to express opinions," says Dr. Tankersley.

**HOW TO GET THERE** "Tell kids as young as 3 or 4 years old that saying 'ewww' or 'ick' about the menu can hurt the feelings of the person who cooked it," says Dr. Gilboa. You don't want them to lie but you do want them to learn words that sting less. "No thanks," "Maybe I'll try it next time," or "Sorry, it's not that yummy to me" are all more polite than "Gross!" suggests



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"Look, Mom! I'm  
an alien!" Bring  
his manners  
back to earth.





**Use large place mats to create “superhero force fields” that the kids aren’t allowed to reach beyond.**

Dr. Gilboa, adding that “We taught our kids to use the code word *interesting* for describing a food they don’t like.”

#### **THE GOAL** asking nicely for food to be passed

“When children see something they want, their first instinct is to reach for it,” says Ashley Harlow, Ph.D., a psychologist at Children’s Hospital and Medical Center, in Omaha.

**HOW TO GET THERE** “Set boundaries of personal space,” says Dr. Harlow. “Put large place mats below each place setting, explaining that arms and other body parts shouldn’t extend beyond the borders.” Creating these fences—call them “superhero force fields” for fun—requires kids to use their magic words when they want something since they can’t reach beyond them. (They also help cut down on spills!) Build in practice by passing dishes family-style in manageable-size bowls.

#### **THE GOAL** chewing with her mouth closed

Little ones have a tendency to take huge bites, which unfortunately means that what they’re chewing stays in full view, laments Cindy Post Senning, Ed.D., codirector of The Emily Post Institute, in Burlington, Vermont.

**HOW TO GET THERE** When you spot a monster-size spoon- or forkful headed for your kid’s mouth, intercept it before it gets there: “Whoa, that’s too much! Why don’t you put half of that back on your plate.” Too late? Explain that you can’t understand what she’s saying if she tries to talk with a full mouth. “Assure excited kids who are worried about missing their turn to speak that once they chew and swallow, you’ll be ready to listen,” says Dr. Senning. You might start a family signal where the person with a full mouth sticks up an index finger when she wants everyone to stay on-topic until she can talk.

#### **THE GOAL** making conversation, not burps, at the table

Kids like to belch because, well, it’s completely inappropriate and, as a result, hilarious. It usually gets a lot of attention—positive (from siblings and friends) and negative (from parents). “Kids love behaviors that get a big reaction,” says Dr. Harlow.

**HOW TO GET THERE** Your mission: Be the most boring audience ever. Ignore the burping and even talk right over it—about the weather, your job, or decorating the house (a snoozefest for kids). If the other kids can’t help but

giggle, put your burper in a time-out away from the table or else he’ll keep on going, suggests Dr. Harlow.

You can also try a little peer pressure. “When my daughter was 8 years old and doing the whole burping thing,” recalls Dr. Carter, “I told her how one of her boy cousins, who was the same age, burped in front of their three teenage cousins and they looked at him as if to say, ‘How gross and childish.’ She idolized those teenagers, so burping lost a lot of its cool.”

#### **THE GOAL** eating with utensils instead of fingers

“Using a utensil can be a challenging skill to master and especially frustrating for a child, even a 9- or 10-year-old, when she’s hungry,” says Dr. Carter. Technology may not be helping either. “Basic table skills, like properly using a fork and knife, seem to be showing up later,” says Robbie Levy, a pediatric occupational therapist in White Plains, New York. “One theory is that electronic games don’t develop the fine motor skills needed for these tasks,” she notes. Plus, they take away time previously spent on activities that do help, such as cutting out snowflakes or molding with Play-Doh.

**HOW TO GET THERE** Start by being flexible about the utensil a young child wants to use. Ditch the toddler fork if she’s begging for the big fork, for instance. Or if she’s having trouble maneuvering a fork, stick with a spoon a bit longer. “The more they watch what other people are eating with, the