

# iPhones, iPads, and family dinners, oh my!

## A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

**H**ave you ever been in a restaurant and watched everyone at the tables on their phones? Have you observed a child valiantly trying to get the parent or caregiver's attention, but to no avail?

Many of us seem to live in a cycle of avoiding real-life contact and conversations with those around us—even at our own dinner table. Long gone are the days when most families would sit and engage in conversations—without a technology device in hand or at arm's reach.

Our dependence on mobile media devices is not only impacting children's development but also affecting the quality of a family's connection and communication with one another.

### Benefits of the family dinner

"Recent studies link the family meal with the kinds of behaviors that parents want for their children: higher grade-point averages, resilience, and self-esteem. Additionally, family meals are linked to lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, eating disorders, and depression. We also believe in the power of family dinners to nourish ethical thinking" (See [www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/the-family-dinner-project](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/the-family-dinner-project)).

We know that quality family mealtimes have benefits, yet we struggle with the pushes and pulls of life, finding it hard to ignore the ping, whistle, and vibration of our phones and tablets.

Active engagement in what a child is doing and saying during mealtime sends the message "You are valuable." Zoning out with technology sends the opposite message. It models the idea that being disconnected from human interaction is OK.

Talking with children during dinner time gives them the opportunity to share the day's experiences and their feelings of frustration, sadness, anxiety, or happiness. This allows children to identify and

communicate their feelings, which will help them later in life.

According to Common Sense Media (a nonprofit educational organization), 51% of adults feel that using devices at the dinner table worsens the quality of their family relationships, yet they often don't know how to curb technology at mealtime. Many parents feel the need to have a device nearby to catch an important call or email. The reasons are vast and notably valid, yet we know that dinner time is only a short period in the day and we really can avoid technology for this timeframe.

Common Sense Media offers media reviews, parent tips, and current research findings at [www.commonsensemedia.org/](http://www.commonsensemedia.org/).

**Make dinner simple.** Dinner doesn't have to be fancy or time-consuming. It can be anything from sandwiches to salad or a meal prepared in a slow cooker all day. Offer each family member a choice of veggies, beans, or scrambled eggs in a lettuce leaf or tortilla. Frozen vegetables and fruit are just as healthy—and require less time to prepare—than fresh ones.

**Choose leftovers or take-out.** Consider making twice as much one night so that you have leftovers another night. Call a nearby restaurant for healthy take-out food, avoiding fried foods and pizza as much as possible. Try a meal kit delivery service that provides prepared ingredients for you to cook in a jiffy. (Cost per person starts at about \$10.) Grocery stores like H-E-B offer a prepared meal that you can order or buy ahead.

**Have an agenda.** Every night plan a topic for conversation. This can be anything from talking about school, planning the next family vacation, or even fun conversation starters such as "If I were to be anyone in the world, I would be...." Try involving your children in coming up with the conversa-

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tion starters.

**Play.** If conversation lags, play a game such as I Spy. You can start, and everyone tries to guess the object you see, which can be anything from a spoon to your child's dimple. Conversations naturally will come up as you play the game, and children will likely get the chance to work on some problem-solving skills too.

**Take dinner outside.** Leave the phones and tablets inside, but take dinner outside. Removing yourself from the table can help you avoid distractions and keep you focused on the conversations and eating. Take care to avoid wet areas where mosquitoes breed, and apply mosquito repellent if necessary.

**Hide it.** Have your child hide your phone or tablet (assuming you feel confident the child will remember where it is after dinner). If you can't see it, the less chance you will reach for it. You can also put the phone in a safe space, away from the table.

**Turn it off.** Simple, but not always easy. We are asked to turn it off in the doctor's office, theater, and meetings, so why not during dinner? Rest assured, the text messages, calls, and emails will be right there when you turn the phone back on after dinner.

**Ban it.** Turning off the devices, hiding them, and removing yourselves essentially mean a ban on phones and tablets. Make sure this applies to parents as well as children.

Family dinners are critical to building emotionally supportive and open relationships with children, especially in today's technological world. Simple, yet effective strategies can support families in accomplishing this important goal. It may take time, creativity, and trial and error, but we get only a short amount of time with children each night. Appreciate the time, engage in the conversations, and remember to have fun!

## About the authors

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# Tips for talking with children

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“What did you do today?” we ask our children when we pick them up from school.  
“Nothin.”

As parents, eager to bond with children, we feel disheartened when a child gives a bland, dismissive reply. It’s important to remember that children are still developing conversation skills and don’t have the experience to pick one or two things from a full day to tell you about.

If you experienced hurtful behavior yourself as a child, telling your child how you felt and what you did about it can be helpful. This lets the child know that he or she is not alone and that you have empathy.

Finally, recognize effort and progress. “I’m so glad you told me about this.” “I can see that you tried really hard.” “I believe you can handle this.” ■

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## IN TALKING, IT’S IMPORTANT TO LISTEN CAREFULLY.

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A more productive question might be: “What did you like best about your day today?” A response such as “Playing with Tommy” or “Making a space station” lends itself to elaboration questions, such as “Why?” “What did you and Tommy do?” or “How did you build it?”

In talking, it’s important to listen carefully—to words as well as feelings. Responding to feelings helps the child identify emotions and know that telling them to someone trustworthy is OK. Certainly we hope to see happy, positive feelings, but it’s critical to sense negative ones as well. “You sound sad (angry, disappointed, upset).” Talking about bad feelings allows a child to release them and talk with you about dealing with them in a healthy way.

In some cases, a child may reveal bullying, name-calling, or some other hurtful behavior. Together you can talk about how to handle it—telling the teacher, contacting the offender’s parents, or saying in a loud voice “Stop bothering me!”

# Helping children learn right from wrong

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## A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

As parents, we want our children to grow up to be honest, confident, and courageous adults. We want their behaviors to show empathy, kindness, and respect to others.

We guide our children in developing these qualities and behaviors by what we say, how we act, and where we focus our attention. We get support in guiding our children from their teachers, respected family members, and admired community leaders.

Another source of support and guidance can be children's books. Books can help children empathize with others, to put themselves in another's shoes. They can help children identify with similar feelings and moral issues they may be facing such as telling the truth, being kind, and resolving disputes. You can find the following books in your local library and as narrated videos on YouTube.

**Breathed, Berkeley. (2000).** *Edward Fudwupper fibbed big.* New York, NY: Little Brown and Company.

Author-illustrator Breathed, known for his comic strip *Bloom County*, presents Edward, who encourages an obese neighbor to dash to Brazil with 10 bikinis because she's been voted the country's queen. In a more outrageous fib, Edward concocts a tale about how two pig creatures from outer space have broken Mom's ceramic treasure. The wordy story ends when the fibs crash under their own craziness.

**Byers, Grace. (2018).** *I am enough.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

"Like the sun, I'm here to shine," begins this book, the first of a dozen pages of rhyming affirmations about loving ourselves, respecting others, and trying our best. Appearance, achievements, and opinions "do not dictate our worth." Despite falling short of our goals, we can say, "I am enough." Although Byers wrote this book to empower girls against the effects of bullying, the text and illustrations (by

Keturah A. Bobo) create a powerful summons for authenticity.

**Clayton, Dallas. (2010).** *An awesome book of thanks.* New York, NY: Two Lions.

This long and whimsically illustrated book expresses gratitude for everything from the sun and earth to alligator acrobats and elephants in silly hats. The author also says thanks to the reader "just for being yourself—yourself's as important as anything else."

**Hoena, Blake. (2018).** *The lion and the mouse.* North Mankato, MN: Cantata Learning.

This retelling of an Aesop's fable illustrates the lesson that regardless of size, big or small, we can help each other. This book comes with a song, "The Lion and the Mouse," recorded on a CD as well as the sheet music and lyrics.

**Lionni, Leo. (1964).** *Swimmy.* New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

In this classic by the author of more than 40 highly acclaimed books for children, a little fish shows his friends how they can avoid danger by using ingenuity and teamwork. A Caldecott winner.

**Pearson, Emily. (2002).** *Ordinary Mary's extraordinary deed.* Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith.

This story illustrates how one act of kindness can have ripple effects on lots of others—in this case, billions of people. It starts when an ordinary girl picks a basket of blueberries and gives them to a neighbor.

**Pfister, Marcus. (1998).** *Rainbow Fish and the big blue whale.* New York: NorthSouth Books.

The approach and continuing presence of an enormous whale scares a group of little fish into thinking it will eat their food and then eat them too. Their panic angers the whale. After a standoff, Rainbow Fish builds up the courage to talk to the whale and admit it was all a mistake.

**Rankin, Laura. (2017).** *Ruthie and the (not so)*

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*teeny tiny lie*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury U.S.A. Children's Books.

Ruthie, portrayed as a small fox, loves tiny things—so much so that when she finds a tiny camera on the playground, she insists that it belongs to her, and not to Martin who says he dropped it. Overwhelmed with guilt, she shares her mistake with her parents. “You made a mistake,” says Dad, “but you can fix it.” And she does—telling her teacher the truth and offering a sincere (if brief) apology to Martin. Issue resolved.

**Stead, Philip. (2010).** *A sick day for Amos McGee*. New York, NY: Roaring Book Press.

Although Amos has a lot to do in his job at the zoo, he always finds time to play chess with the elephant, read stories to the owl, and have fun with other animals. One day, when Amos gets sick and stays home, his zoo friends come to visit him. A Caldecott winner. ■