

Parenting with Confidence
Dinner Without the Drama
By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

Dinnertime is out of control in our house. My 9-year-old taunts his younger sister, and our 4-year-old is up and out of his chair every minute. I am wiped out by dinnertime and have no tolerance. The more I threaten and scream, the worse the mayhem. I am thinking TV trays might be a blessing!

Dear Parent:

When mealtime turns to madness, it is time to step back and take a good look at your system. Consider all the factors as you take a look at your dinnertime ritual. Rather than resorting to threats and bribes while feeling angry and exhausted, try reworking your dinnertime ritual. You may find you can enable cooperation rather than get stuck in power struggles.

Ask yourself many questions. What time is dinner, and are your children hungry? Diminished appetite squelches motivation to sit through a meal. What are you doing prior to dinner? When children are charged up and hungry, it can be a challenge to settle down. Is another adult present? Children often behave differently with the parent who has not been “on” all afternoon. Any chance that you have accidentally reinforced the unwanted behaviors by chasing after your 4-year-old or arguing with your eldest? Such questions will help you get clear about how you manage dinnertime.

The first step in parenting is to get in touch with your values. Think about what dinnertime means. What is the purpose of dinnertime during the week for your family? Is it a calm time for connection? A quick refueling before evening activities? A time for

debating and loud discourse? Whatever your ritual represents, it helps to be clear and upfront in order to bring your values to the table.

Assess your family's needs, with respect to arrival time from work and school, time needed for homework or bedtime. Take every factor into consideration, including preparation and cleanup. Perhaps you would do better to move snack time up earlier or drop snacking all together. Cooking over the weekends or picking up ready-made frozen meals may be the key to reducing dinnertime tension. You may find your children behave better when there is quiet time just prior to dinner. They may love the attention and mastery gained by helping you prepare for dinner. Experiment with the timing and sequence of your dinnertime ritual. The first few minutes could involve an appetizer following a prayer.

Most important, think about your needs as the primary parent at dinnertime. Be careful to plan your strategy and system around your capacity to be resourceful and mindful. Children can sniff out a parent's fatigue as a green light to be wild.

Now that you know, for example, that you want family time to be a civil time to sit together for 30 minutes and a time for connection, here are a few more suggestions to help you enact your valuable vision.

- Announce a new system with new expectations for behavior at a time when your children can listen. Deliver your message with confidence and keep it simple. Note: Never do this while children are acting up. Teaching moments come during quiet moments not during times of reactivity and anger.
- During a separate family discussion, it is fine to engage your children in a discussion about rules at the dinner table, such as whether and how to ask to be excused, and whether and how to have second servings. Decide if dessert is tied to good behavior in your family. After giving them a voice, make your decisions about your system.
- Without pronouncing what has *not* worked, announce the new system that will replace how things have been going, such as, "Dinner will now be a little later. You

may have some fruit after school, then comes homework time. After you guys play a while, I will ring a bell for dinnertime. At dinner we stay seated while we share our day with each other and have our meal.”

- State and restate the rules frequently, in a calm manner, just as you would on the way to the library. Every day, when you call your kids to dinner, you can remind them, “Time to wash your hands for dinner. Remember, we sit at the table and ask to be excused.” Reminders about how to behave are necessary cues or prompts for your children.
- Such reminders can be made at any time during your meal. Simply be careful to bring your voice down in a definitive, matter-of-fact manner. When our voices go up, we can sound tentative or threatening and inadvertently invite choice or opposition.
- Simply state the directive, loud and clear, without any threats or bribes, such as, “It’s time for dinner.” Expect to repeat yourself.
- It may be wise not to allow screen time before transitioning to dinnertime, especially if you know this is problematic with your children. However, you may use the incentive for later screen time by connecting the expected behavior to the desired behavior, stating, “When you show that you can turn your video game off to come to dinner, you may continue to play video games later.”
- When you find your child is not responding or is perhaps testing you, avoid reactivity. Move forward with your other children, thereby ignoring the child who is resisting cooperation. Ignoring requires no reactivity.
- When a child acts out by engaging in negative attention, use as few words as possible to excuse him until he is ready. Avoid launching into lectures or reminders at this time. Engage other family members again immediately.
- Exchange the word “if” with “when” and “then,” connecting the cooperative behavior to a positive outcome. So rather than, “If you don’t come to dinner, there is no dessert,” try, “When you come to the dinner table, stay with us and eat your dinner, then you will get dessert.”
- Do not overuse “time out.” When correcting and redirecting a child, keep it

simple. Sometimes it is enough to say, “Start over,” or, “Try that again.”

- When the noncompliant child interrupts, correct and redirect with minimal affect. Move him forward quickly by saying, “As soon as you are ready to join us, say, ‘ready.’” When a child is ready right away, give him a second chance and say so: “Great, you may join us for dinner.” Do not launch into a lecture. Simply carry on with dinnertime. The learning comes from your actions, not your talking.

Children learn best from action and experience. You must be careful to look at your entire system when setting up behavioral expectations, whether for bedtime or dinnertime. Once you are very clear about what will work, which takes a lot of thinking and some ongoing reconstructing, your children easily comply. When the system makes sense for everyone’s needs and for what you aim to accomplish, no one is set up to misbehave.

Dinnertime is a chance to be present for one another in order to connect and refuel. It is crucial for parents to set the stage carefully to prevent dinnertime battles and create dinnertime blessings.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Kensington. Visit www.kayabrams.com to read more articles and learn about parenting workshops, mothers’ groups and teen girls’ groups.