

Focusing on the importance of rituals in building relationships

Family-Style Dining

by Jerry Parr

Location, location, and location. It's the restaurateur's doctrine of success, the genesis of multi-million dollar research projects to identify *prime real estate*, the reason our towns have become blighted by strips of franchises and chains. But it would appear that location is not quite enough; anyone, frequent traveler, family newly relocated to a different town, or someone just looking for something different, anyone who has occasion to let their fingers stroll the Yellow Pages or do a restaurant search on the web will see far fewer references to where a restaurant is located than they will large font enticements of "Family Style Dining." Advertisements abound for family style dining. From the local diner to five-star "fine dining," the ads entreat us to "come and enjoy some down home, just-like-mother family dining." The ads dare us to turn away from a meal served just like mom was going to be there. And, contrary to the location issue, they dare us not to care how far out of the way we need to go to get there!

What is it about *Family Style Dining* that holds such power over our decision-making? Simple nostalgia? Hope for a flashback experience to the good old days? Guilt that we know our parents are somewhere eating a miserable meal all by themselves because we abandoned them in pursuit of a career? An image of an apron-clad June Cleaver presenting platters of delicious treats

that will bring harmony to our fractious family?

Hey, who knows? Anyway, it is most likely different for every one of us. The common denominator is that the image of family mealtime is powerful, positive, and too often missing from the high-tech era family *agenda*. As all of us in the child care industry know, most

families have both parents in the work place, or even more likely, there is only one parent in the home. Children spend an increasing amount of time under their own supervision or in the care of non-family members. Most meals, particularly the evening meal, look more like a Keystone Cops routine than a family meal. Meals are fast, and selected for efficiency rather than nutritious value. The kitchen (or just as often the car) is a place to open bags and divide the drive-through window *spoils* rather than a place of language, science, and socialization.

Early childhood educators have long understood the meaning and value of family style dining. For Head Start directors it has been an integral part of their program design since Head Start's inception in 1964. Interestingly, the mandate for family style dining has its roots not just in good nutrition but also in a commitment to the role family style dining plays in socialization and cognitive development. A well-designed family dining experience allows children, cooks, and staff to be partners in the

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meal, teaching and learning from each other, cherishing noise and spills, examining the physics behind the creamed corn cascading down the face of the clock, encouraging choices, decision-making, problem-solving, sharing and caring, math, science, language, and faith. When a puddle of spilled milk becomes a time of exploration and there is more spaghetti on the outside than the inside, but that's ok; when a tiny hand holding a giant spoon tries to aim some taters at a plate and misses, but that's ok; when intergenerational relationships have a chance to form and ideas are exchanged among staff and children and it's ok, then the meal is not just food for tummies . . . it's food for thought.

Every early childhood practitioner knows the importance of routines in a child's development. Routines play a pivotal role in the development of trust, attachments, autonomy, and early learning. Repetition and familiarity are by-laws of a developmentally sound curriculum. What better place to start than at the family table, or the classroom table? Cooking and eating together can be a wonderful classroom routine. Teachers can help children make recipes with words and pictures prior to guiding them through the cooking experience. Cooking with children is the perfect *webbing* experience, integrating social, emotional, and cognitive development. When children help prepare the meal they are engaging all their senses, in a natural context, in concept and skill development areas that nurture their abilities to become life long learners: language, spatial relationships, numbers and numeration, letter and sound recognition, discrimination, predicting, cause and effect . . . the list is infinite. Cooking is as much magic as science: the magic of transforming solids into liquids, turning a cardboard box of stuff into lunch . . . and meals into memories.

For many of us family style dining provided opportunities to share time with

our parents and siblings that could not occur in any other context. The meal was a routine that satisfied more than our appetites. The meal was a sanctuary from all the influences and enormities that cluttered our days. The smells and sounds of food being prepared, the comforting sight of dishes with cracks and chips that could each be identified and cataloged by incident (usually with a memory of three fingers pointing at three different culprits and the chorus of "he did it" loud enough to crack the remaining plates stacked beside the dish sink).

Dinner bowls filled with steaming veggies lined up along the entire table neighbored with a platter of meat . . . chicken or chops, burgers or steaks, and always a huge salad with homemade dressing (sometimes warm . . . try to forget that!). Breakfast always had eggs in some form: scrambled, poached, fried (always sunny side up), hidden in a waffle, omelet, soft boiled in its own little cup (which could double as an eye wash cup), medium boiled on toast and butter (our family received personalized Christmas cards from the upstate New York Butter Association).

No matter what was on the table, no matter what the day had been like, no matter what the rest of the day had in store . . . mealtime was family time. It was not negotiable; it required no periphery diversions . . . the television was off (not an issue until we were teens since we didn't have a television before that!) and the phone went unanswered (except by the neighbors using the same party line . . . still the best answering machine I've ever had!). The meal was all the entertainment our family required — and it was extremely entertaining!

Roles and responsibilities were defined and refined at that table. The pecking order was identified and challenged (never successfully but always mightily). Fears were laid to rest (or exaggerated

for little brother if mom stepped out of earshot long enough). Ideas were researched and accepted or rejected. Dreams were shared. Myths about schoolyard bullies, tough grading teachers, and crabby neighbors were shattered or perpetuated (often depending upon the color of the meat served that meal; steak still tends to bring out the mischief in my family). We talked, we cried, we yelled, we *muttered* under our breath (I never completely understood that one until I became a Popeye fan; he is the absolute master of mutter!). We shielded each other and we told on each other; but everything was safe under the protective umbrella of *mealtime*. Everyone knew where to sit (and when), who went first (and last), who got the new glass (acquired from the gas station because we filled up the Mercury), and who would be the first one to embellish the events of the day (youngest to oldest).

I had an opportunity to witness the long term effects of family style dining when I was invited to a co-worker's summer cabin recently. We were all sitting at an old scarred table making ham sandwiches when a rickety screen door announced the arrival of five elderly men (the youngest was 91!). Everyone (but me) jumped from their chairs when the five men walked into the cabin. I thought that this was a wonderful sign of respect. I continued to think so as my co-worker nudged me from my seat (and my sandwich!), with more than a little fear on her face. It turns out the five men were brothers and I was sitting in one of their seats . . . the same seat he had used for more than 90 years! Different chair, different location; but that was his place at the table between the same two brothers and across from the same two brothers that he has sat between for nine decades! The good news was I got out of the chair in time. The great news was that he hated horseradish so I got my sandwich back. Routines, rituals, and traditions that survived time and every other change that befell

those five brothers, forged at the family table.

Lest I ever forget my own advice, I need only remember back two years ago when my daughter was four years old. It was lunch time on a very stormy day. She took her bowl of macaroni and cheese to the playroom and sat at her table designed to accommodate a single person . . . well designed with a small indentation for her glass and a chair that fit a small child just perfectly, but nevertheless designed for a solitary diner. She had her little table positioned perfectly in front of the television ready for her afternoon meal. I happened into her playroom where the television screen was receiving a scrambled signal during the storm and my daughter was rocking in her seat with huge trembles coursing through her from toe to head, barely audible sobs and gasps for breaths wracking her. Panicked, I rushed to her and ask her what was wrong. I could actually see her visible attempts to bring herself into a state of composure so that she would be able to explain to me the gravity of the situation. Gulping huge amounts of air, one arm wrapped tightly around her waist the other pointing at the television, she said to me, "My best friend is not working. I don't know how to eat without my best friend!"

Somehow we had let a horrible situation evolve right in front of us . . . completely disappearing from our parental radar screens. It had become simpler and more efficient to let television be the mealtime companion so that we *could get a few things done*. Some memories were created that afternoon. For me the memory of seeing my four year old devastated by the thought of not having her television companion at her side while she ate her lunch will never fade. For my daughter, the memory of seeing her daddy crumble at her feet matching her sobs followed by the memory of her *best friend* flying out the porch door will never be enough to

replace those dozens of hours that we were *being efficient*.

Our family is back at the table together . . . allowing the house to be a little messier, the dishes a little less done, the beds a little less made, the grass a little longer (except where the television is . . . there the grass is almost long enough to help me forget), the car a little less washed We're back at the family table making memories that we can be proud of.

Everyone in the school or center needs to remember to bring the family back into dining — sitting together as a classroom family, talking, enjoying, role playing. Ignore the cots left unstacked. Forget about the paint dripping down the easel, the block in the doll corner and the doll in the sand table. Focus on the kids. Eat with them, spill with them, laugh with them. Throw some creamed corn at the clock!