

# 12 Questions You Should Ask Your Kids at Dinner

Take full advantage of the opportunity to connect as a family at mealtime.

## It's time to eat. Where are the kids?

Parents: Do you [routinely sit down to family meals](#)? Research suggests doing so may be beneficial, helping bolster kids' social skills while improving their eating habits. An American Academy of Pediatrics [report](#) in the journal *Pediatrics* last year noted that regular family meals may help ensure adolescents eat more fruits and veggies, and are associated with a decreased risk of developing [eating disorders](#), particularly for girls. But the benefits may be reduced if you give into [distracted dining](#), constantly checking your mobile device. You must engage – and be thoughtful about what you discuss. To make the most of your time together, parenting experts suggest asking the following questions.

### 1. What is something interesting (or fun or difficult) you did today?

While questions you ask will vary depending on your child's age, this can be a great place to start. "Sharing what your child's day was like and what is important to them grows your relationship," says [Dr. Gail Saltz](#), a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City. "Then it's also important to tell them what you valued in your day." For [school-age kids](#), you might also ask, "*What was the most interesting thing you learned today?*" This will be helpful for understanding what excites your child, where she may need extra opportunities or help, and in fostering love of learning, Saltz says.

### 2. What's on your mind today?

Make it clear your children can talk about anything and that you'll listen. This is not conversational entrapment – getting a kid to spill the beans, only to come down on the child. Experts say it's important kids [feel understood](#), and can openly share whatever may be on their minds. The topics needn't be serious or heavy, either. Swap stories to bond, suggests [Dr. Shimi Kang](#), a medical director for child and youth mental health for Vancouver Coastal Health's community programs in British Columbia. If your child relays difficulties he's having with certain classes, tell him about subjects you struggled with. And share age-appropriate stories from your childhood.

### 3. Who did you sit with at lunch today?

Experts emphasize parents ask questions that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." "The reason you need to ask specific questions is because otherwise you will get one-word answers that won't really let you know how your child is doing," says [Susan Bartell](#), a child psychologist with a practice in Port Washington, New York. "Kids and teens don't really want to make the effort to share the details of school, especially when some of the details may be upsetting, embarrassing or unpleasant." She adds: "Don't grill your child, but if you hit on something that seems concerning ('I sat alone at lunch') it's important to follow up."

#### 4. Can I tell you about something crazy that happened to me today?

OK, maybe it wasn't *that* crazy, and you might dismiss this question as merely a request to [share your story](#) – but that's the point. “Kids are developmentally quite self-centered. Learning to care about others starts at home, but only if they are shown how to care about the lives of others,” Bartell says. “It is up to you to show them that it is important that they care about your world. This not only teaches them to think beyond themselves, it also helps them feel good that you want them as an audience. In the same way, you can ask their opinions, especially as they get a bit older.”

#### 5. What are all the things you're grateful for today?

[Nancy Buck](#), a developmental psychologist based in Denver, recommends using mealtime as an opportunity to talk about ideas, values or principles you believe are important to teach and instill in your kids. “This is not the time to lecture, but instead is the time to get curious and share,” she says. Along with discussing values your family holds dear, experts say [teaching children how to express gratitude](#) is important for their development and overall well-being. Research also links feeling grateful – and being able to express gratitude – with improved relationships and happiness.

#### 6. Do you feel full?

For very young kids, [Jill Castle](#) – a registered dietitian and childhood nutrition expert based in New Canaan, Connecticut – suggests alternatively asking: “*What does your tummy tell you? Is your tummy still hungry or happy?*” Not every piece of dinner table conversation needs to be high-minded. Kids and adults can benefit from paying attention to [internal cues](#), like the feeling of hunger, and [mindful eating](#). “Talking about hunger, fullness and satisfaction helps children become aware of their appetite,” Castle says. This is preferable to relying on external cues – like an adult telling a child he or she must eat a certain number of bites – that can lead to overeating.

#### 7. What made you laugh recently?

Understanding how your child is feeling about life requires learning more about the way they experience their days – not simply what happened. “*When did you experience joy today?*” is another question you could ask, Buck suggests. Just as with language development or math, children must learn how to [understand and manage their emotions](#), such as through interactions with parents, teachers and other adults as well as peers. To gauge whether they've had a great day or a lousy one, you might also ask, “*How would you rate your day on a scale of 1 to 10?*” Then take the opportunity to further understand what's behind their feelings.

#### 8. Do you have any questions about what's going on in the news?

In this hyper-connected, politically charged modern era, kids and adolescents – like adults – are often bombarded with more information than they can handle. This can cause [anxiety](#), and may ultimately lead to concerns or questions they might not feel at liberty to raise. “Kids hear stuff and don't always understand what it's about or how it makes sense in their world,” Saltz says. “Asking your child what's on their radar and discussing their take is useful to correct misperceptions, quell fears [and] be aware of their world.”

#### 9. What do you want to do tomorrow?

Take time to involve your child in making plans for the family, like determining how to [get the most out of winter](#). By doing so, you can use dinner as a chance to talk about what he or she is looking forward to doing, in addition to reflecting on what's happened in your child's life. It could involve discussing family vacation plans or just sticking to how you'd like to spend the next 24 hours. Another approach to capture your child's changing interests: “*What activities do you enjoy most these days?*”

## 10. How are your friends or classmates doing?

Is your child experiencing mostly smooth sailing of late or rougher waters – like being [picked on by peers](#)? “Talking about the social environment and understanding and helping with potential social pitfalls is important. This is where you may hear about bullying issues, fights, negotiating friendships and friend groups,” Saltz says. “Providing feedback and even role playing about sticky situations can help your child navigate their waters.” Another question to ask to gauge their social connections: *“Who do you talk with most often at school?”*

## 11. What did you talk about in English or history (or some other class)?

Being specific to a particular class may help you get a better sense of what your child discussed versus asking generally about his or her school day. You might also ask, *“What did you talk about over lunch?”* Expect more resistance to this question from adolescents who choose to be discrete, and more openness from younger kids. “Use open-ended questions that require your child to provide multi-sentence answers,” says [Russell Hyken](#), a family therapist based in St. Louis. “The topic is not as important as building trust and connections. That said, I think it is important to know about your child’s day. This provides insight into their mood, school and social life.”

## 12. What was your best success of the day?

Talking about high points – as well as, *“what was the low point of your day?”* – is another good way to gain insight into your child’s life. Feel free to talk about what happened to you as well. By interjecting a slice of your life, this puts you and your child on equal ground, Hyken notes – and may lead your child to share a story. Another question, especially if it seems pertinent to their mood: *“Are you [stressed](#) about anything?”* “It is always about building connection so when there is an issue, your child will trust you to help them work through their concerns,” he says.