

Mealtime Conversations

A Recipe for Advancing Children's Literacy

Family mealtime conversations can contribute to a child's language and thinking in ways that support learning to read and write. A child's language skills contribute to success at school. Mealtimes offer children opportunities to:

- learn new words
- practice telling and understanding stories and explanations
- gain general knowledge

Family meal time has the potential for strife. But, you can choose to make your family meals a time for learning. This does not have to be "formal" learning and happens during everyday mealtime conversations. Everyone can participate. Mealtime conversations can be destructive or they can be a safe haven or they can be in between.

What characterizes a healthy family meal?

- It is reasonably planned, structured, and predictable.
- Family members communicate. They talk about problems they are facing and get support from each other. Mealtime is *not* used for discipline purposes.
- Meals are filled with meaning. People talk about past experiences and discussion bonds family members together.

Conversation includes explanatory and narrative talk.

Explanatory Talk

Explanations can be started by a child's question (for example, "Mommy, what does 'budget' mean?") or by parents trying to help their child understand something (for example, "So why do you think the firemen carry oxygen tanks with them?") Explanatory talk opens the door to learn about the world.

Explanatory talk often deals with complex issues and is richly informative. Typically, more than one party contributes to the conversation. This kind of talk provides opportunities for new or unusual words.

Explanatory talk differs from "management" talk such as: "Eat your peas," "I want more noodles," "Sit up straight," or "Stop kicking your sister." Management talk rarely extends beyond a single conversational turn and almost never includes rare words or has complicated topics.



Narrative Talk

Story telling takes many skills. It means keeping track of who did what and when. It's being able to follow the sequence of events and keep track of hypotheticals. Story telling is one kind of narrative talk.

Narrative talk recounts past events or gives practice in making future plans. Narrative talk helps children with school tasks such as recognizing sequences of events or planning to complete projects on time.

In the following narrative table talk example, Rosalyn has the opportunity to learn a new word (license) and plan for her future.

Father: Pretty soon you'll be big enough to drive to the store and buy the groceries for us.
Rosalyn: I will?
Mother: (*laughs*)
Father: Sure. In fourteen years.
Rosalyn: That's fun.
Father: In fourteen years you'll be seventeen. And you'll have your driver's license and go grocery shopping.
Mother: In fourteen years, she'll be nineteen.
Father: Oh, right, I'm sorry. Gee! Only twelve years and you'll be seventeen. Suppose Cheryl (Rosalyn's older sister) will go grocery shopping for us when she gets her license?
Rosalyn: Hmm (*laughs*).
Father: Maybe she'll offer to do it just so she can drive the car (*laughing*).
Mother: I don't know.
Father: That would be the only reason she'd offer.
Mother: Mmhm.
Rosalyn: That would be real good (*giggles*). I hope she doesn't crash.
Father: Well, we hope she doesn't crash either.
Source: Snow & Beals, 2006

Rare Words

Mealtime talk often introduces relatively sophisticated vocabulary (rare words), typically as part of narrative or explanatory talk. Knowing rare words such as budget, oxygen, and license becomes important to children's success in participating in classroom talk and reading after Grade 3.

Prepared by: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
Reviewer: Angela Wiley, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, University of Illinois
Layout: Penny Otte, Office Operations Associate, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

Mealtime conversations serve many purposes: catch up on the day's events, plan the next day's activities, reminisce about shared experiences, answer puzzling questions, seek explanations for strange happenings, and solve problems. Conversations that support children's literacy share certain characteristics: center on a single topic; topic is complex enough that the talk goes on for several utterances or turns; to be fully explored, the topic needs input from several participants. This means that the talk is likely to be complex, challenging, engaging, and the perfect opportunity for children to gain language skills. All of this potential for learning occurs in a natural conversation engaged in by people who care about each other.

The more children are exposed to extended conversations during mealtimes, the more chance they have to learn new words, understand stories and explanations, and know about the world. Children who have a chance to acquire these skills at home have an important advantage in pursuing school success.



Sources:

- Snow, C., & Beals, D. (2006). Mealtime talk that supports literacy development. In R. Larson, A. Wiley, & K. Branscomb (Eds.), *Family mealtime as a context of development and socialization* (pp. 51-66). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wiley, A. (2007, January). Vegetables, vocabulary and love: mealtimes as opportunities for raising resilient children. Paper presented at the University of Wisconsin – Extension Family Living Conference, The Realities of Wisconsin Families and Communities, Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

This document can be made available in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, or audio tape, by contacting your county Extension office. (TTY 1-800-947-3529)

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin, Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
September, 2007