

FOOD & DINING

Enjoy dining out with kids

Parents know taking kids out to eat requires patience. The sights and sounds of a restaurant can be overwhelming and distracting to children used to eating at home.

Toddlers have not learned to control their impulses yet, and even school-aged children may experience intermittent breakdowns when they are uncomfortable or not feeling well. But parents who want to take their tots out on the town can employ some easy steps to make eating out a fun excursion for everyone.

PRACTICE

Daniel Post Senning, the great-grandson of etiquette expert Emily Post and co-author of "Emily Post's Etiquette, 18th edition," says parents can practice dining out by replicating the experience (as much as possible) at home. Ask the children to use inside voices and exhibit proper behavior at the dinner table. Remove children from the table if they misbehave and try again another time.

Parents also can acclimate their youngsters to dining out by gradually working their way up to

more formal restaurants. Start by dining out at a place where table behavior or noise may be more tolerable, such as a fast-food restaurant, before moving on to a casual restaurant and then a nicer restaurant when kids can handle it.

PROVIDE DISTRACTIONS

Many young children cannot sit still for long and may need a series of distractions to keep them entertained throughout meals. Pack a bag of tricks that includes toys, games, books, and even a digital device tuned to kids' favorite programs.

Pick restaurants that do not have a long wait to get a seat so that kids' patience has not worn thin before you even make it to the table. A sightseeing walk around the restaurant also may be able to provide a welcome distraction until the food is ready.

PACK SNACKS

Although the goal may be to eat out, kids may not be as patient as adults when waiting for their meals to be delivered. Ask servers to bring out the kids' meals when appetizers are served or think ahead and have some light snacks, such as crackers or dry cereal, available to tame kids' hunger pangs.

CHOOSE RESTAURANTS WISELY

Make concessions as to where and when you eat. Coordinate around nap times so children will be happy and well-rested.

Select restaurants that accommodate children. Ask to be seated out of the way just in case your son or daughter acts up. This way you

will not disturb other patrons.

Restaurants tend to be less busy right before dinner service and directly after. If you can time your meals to these off-peak hours, it may make for a more enjoyable dining experience.

OFFER PLENTY OF PRAISE

Always let children know when they are doing a great job and behaving well in a restaurant. Engage kids in conversation and keep them entertained. Boredom or attention-seeking behavior can make dining out with youngsters more difficult to manage.

A treat or a special reward (sticker or coloring book) can be offered to a child who behaves when dining out.

BE COURTEOUS AND RESPECTFUL

Many children will eventually act up in restaurants, and parents should respond to such instances as courteously as possible. Apologize to those around you whom your child has disturbed. Remove your son or daughter from the area and take a few moments to help him or her calm down. If kids can't be calmed down, ask that your meal be wrapped.

Remember to clean up after yourselves and thank the waitstaff for any extra service, such as lugging a heavy high chair or providing extra silverware if kids drop any forks or spoons. Don't leave a large mess for the server, and tip accordingly.

Children grow accustomed to dining out over time. It may take some practice, but with the right planning, families can enjoy meals away from home.



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