

# SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

## Messy Eating

**Question:** My daughter eats really messily. It bothers other family members. How can I help her develop good table manners other than just reminding her?

As your child grows, she is learning how to see the world through other people's eyes. She is becoming more aware of who she is and how others might see her. You can help her begin to manage her mealtime mess while helping to promote the life skill of Perspective Taking.

**Perspective Taking** goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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### Think about your child's development.

**Eating neatly takes a lot of coordination.** Your child is learning to coordinate her physical movements with her hands, fingers, eyes and mouth while she is eating. Her messy eating may indicate that she is still learning how to use forks and spoons to eat and continues to need practice in doing so.

**Young children experience the world through their senses.** Your child's messy eating may be a part of her exploration of textures, colors and smells. If this is the case, you can provide her with other opportunities to explore with her senses, such as playing with bubbles in the bathtub.

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### Talk with your child about perspectives—hers and others.

While the skill of Perspective Taking develops throughout the preschool years, studies have found that children are most likely to learn it when adults talk about their child's thoughts and feelings and those of others. Here are some strategies you might use.

- **Talk with your child about why having good table manners matter.** If she spills food on the floor, on the table or on placemats, explain it is hard for others to clean up this food or that it could attract bugs. If the food gets on her clothes, talk about how difficult it can be get stains out of clothes. If she is playing with her food—not eating it—talk about why you care about not wasting food.
- **Use books and television to start conversations about other people's feelings.** Giving your child the chance to think about the perspectives of others in a safe and fun way helps her build those skills to use in daily life, including mealtime. When you read or watch TV, you can point out a character's face and ask your child, "I wonder how he is feeling? What made him feel that way?"

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### Use problem-solving strategies.

You can work with your child to come up with a plan that supports your child during mealtimes. You might try:

- **Have a conversation with your child about her mealtime behavior.** You can say something like: "At dinner, it seems like it is hard for you to keep all of your food on your plate. A lot of it ends up on the floor, and it makes a big mess. What ideas do you have to keep your food on your plate?" Be sure to use positive and supportive language. The goal is to help your child, not to make her feel bad or embarrassed.
- **Be clear about expectations.** Before you eat together, whether it is at home or out at a restaurant, have a discussion about how you expect your child to behave. Say something like: "Remember, you can use your napkin instead of your hand when you are eating, so you can keep your clothes clean." Clear expectations help your child understand the reasons behind other people's actions.
- **Explore what works:**
  - Using a special signal, like a touch or a look, as a reminder for her.
  - Providing your child a choice of wearing a smock or an apron as she works on eating neatly.
  - Encouraging your child to use her "helping hand." Show her how to hold a bowl or plate with one hand while using a fork or spoon in the other.
  - Trying out different cups and utensils to see what works best for your child. For example, is a straw easier for her to use than an open cup? What size spoon or fork is better?
  - Using a visual reminder like a placemat or napkin under her plate to help her see where her food should stay.
  - Asking your child to clean up after herself. She can help wipe down the table, sweep the floor and wash her hands and face.

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### Give your child opportunities to pretend and role play.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley says that when children pretend, they are figuring things out:

What's it like if you're the mommy? What are mommies like? What are daddies like? What are babies like? What happens when [the] mommy says this; then what's the daddy supposed to say? Those are ways that children are actively experimenting, actively trying to figure out what's going on with other children, [what's] going on in other people's minds.

Pretend play is a safe and fun way for children to practice Perspective Taking. Children feel better when they are able to pretend about their experiences. Join with your child to help guide her play. You can:

- **Take on the role of a neat eater and then let your child have a turn.** This is a great opportunity to demonstrate the skills you want your child to learn.

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## Praise your child's efforts.

Reinforce your child's successes and remember to support her when she struggles. Say things like:

- "You remembered to put just a few pieces of food on your spoon and they didn't spill!"
- "Dinnertime was so much more enjoyable for everyone because we didn't have a big clean up afterwards. Thank you!"

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## Be patient.

Try to avoid making mealtime a battle as your child continues to grow and develop. Having a more peaceful approach will help your daughter learn to use the skill of Perspective Taking to make choices and manage her own behavior.