

june @ symbio

upcoming presentations

Understanding Your Child's Unique Temperament

Tuesday 15 June
7:30-9:00pm

Temperament plays a large role in determining how your child experiences and relates to her or her world. Every child is unique temperamentally, which is why each child responds differently to parents' strategies regarding issues such as sleep, discipline and learning. This talk will help you form an understanding of how your child's unique temperament affects your interactions with him or her and how it influences your child's role in your family. We'll provide guidelines for effective ways of working with various temperaments.

@ Twins By The Bay
Northbrae Church
941 The Alameda
Berkeley CA
RSVP: www.twinsbythebay.org

TBB members (suggested donation):
\$10/person or \$15/couple
non-members: \$30/person or \$35/couple

Dealing with Temper Tantrums

Tuesday 22 June
7:00-9:00pm

When a child's emotions overflow, the boundaries of composure often give way (for both children and parents). We'll talk about the meaning and management of temper tantrums: how they related to limit testing, what can be gained from them and what your response to a tantrum means to your child. And, most importantly, we'll talk about how to reduce the frequency and intensity of these emotional storms.

@ Peekadoodle Kidsclub
900 North Point Street, F100
San Francisco CA
RSVP: info@thepkc.com

Peekadoodle members:
\$40/person or \$60/couple
non-members: \$45/person or \$65/couple
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photo by: www.andrewweeksp photographykids.com

Managing Mealtimes: Pasta and Harmony

Q: *Help! Mealtimes at our house have become miserable, which is very disappointing to my partner and I. He and I both grew up in large families where coming together over meals was central to our family ties. One of my most important goals for parenthood was to get my kids into a habit of enjoying food and sharing time together at the table on daily basis. My vision of family life was loving, hard work punctuated by experiences of pasta and harmony. My mother always said that good habits start early, and we have always made a point of having sit-down meals together. But just getting my son to sit down has been a struggle from the very beginning. Now, at three and a half, he won't sit still for more than a few minutes; he runs away from the table several times during each meal. He hates his fork and is constantly in trouble for not using it or throwing it, or parts of his meal. My son knows the rules – he can repeat them – but I cannot get good cooperation from him. No amount of explaining, cajoling or threatening has made a difference. I am pregnant with our second and lately my temper with our son is really short. My lack of patience is just one more part of the picture that doesn't match our vision. I feel like we are losing a grip on our hopes for building healthy family habits. We had imagined building wonderful mealtime memories as a family, but our meals are all fray and dismay instead. It's chaos. To be fair, we have not been consistent with our rules or how we enforce them at dinnertime, or really in most other places either, but we are not even sure what we should be doing at this point to get things back on track. It makes me sad to dread dinner with my son.*

A: We can't blame you for dreading dinners when it feels like the future of your family vision hangs in the balance as you attempt to control chaos. We do agree with your mother that good habits start early; but we can also promise you that you have room to maneuver through a progression of stages before you are faced with defining the importance of sharing meals as a family.

It may help to remember that there is more than one habit at issue here. The habit of eating meals together may seem like the main focus, but your interactions around mealtime are also establishing more basic habits around how mealtimes feel, how people relate to each other when food is involved and how your children respond to your instructions. Like any other aspect of health, truly healthy habits must be based on a healthy foundation. Your family habits around the basic elements that shape mealtimes are the foundation for a lifetime of positive memories at the family table. You are likely to experience more success, and less stress, if you approach the process of establishing these habits in steps and move through them one at a time.

Your vision requires a balanced association of fun and structure at mealtimes. Eating together will never be fun if you all feel frustrated by a breakdown of structure. In order to successfully create structure around meals you will have to have a sense of structure around rules in general; and it will be easier to establish a pattern of consistent boundaries at mealtimes if mealtimes are not different from the rest of life in this regard.

The first step in the process is working on establishing more consistency in general; of creating a global sense that the rules matter in your family. Without this, rules will do you little good, no matter how many rules you have, or how gently or emphatically you present them.

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Yoga + Love and Limits for Your Toddler

Friday 25 June
3:30-5:00pm

Enjoy some healthy fun with yoga poses, playful movement and connection time for you and your toddler with It's Yoga Kids. After the class we will present information on setting limits with toddlers in a way that creates structure and supports your child's emotional health and well being. There will be time for q&a to answer individual questions.

@ It's Yoga, Kids
569 Ruger Street, The Presidio
San Francisco CA
RSVP: training@itsyogakids.com

Fee: \$50

A sit-down meal can be a difficult endeavor for many young children. It requires, keeping the body still (enough) over a period of time, modulating stimulation, directing attention and regulating expression of emotion. Especially for very active or more sensitive children, this amounts to quite a challenge. In order to meet it, your son will need the support of a clear and firm structure. If he can practice dealing with clear rules and boundaries in situations that require less sustained effort on his part, he'll know better what to expect, and how to deal with it at the table.

You may need to relax your expectations around mealtime for a while and focus on creating a norm around keeping boundaries in general. This doesn't mean you need to have a Draconian approach to setting limits. It does mean that when you say "no" or "you must" you have to follow through on holding that line. If you are consistent with this, your son will take you seriously when you say that something must, or must not, be done. If you have not been consistent with your boundaries, you may need to take a step back and work on strengthen your authority before you will be able to leverage it effectively.

With a good foundation of consistency overall, you can effectively turn to your attention to improving mealtimes, and making them fun. Right now, it sounds like you are all in pattern of experiencing failure at mealtimes. If your son is used to failing to comply with your instructions and getting into a power struggle with you at meals, then that's what he will expect to do every time you all meet at the table. On the other hand, if he is used to having an experience in which he feels both a sense of enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment at exercising some self-control, he'll expect that. Either way, he is much more likely to create an experience that complies with his expectations rather than one that defies them. This makes creating a pattern of success critical to getting change to happen. In order to do this, you may need to temporarily reduce the length of meals, or move to having some dinners all together and some meals where your son eats before you do in order to ease the pressure on mealtimes and to get out of the routine of fray and dismay. You can come back together for longer meals once you've worked on new skills.

For now, scale back and work on the basics. Instead of expecting good cooperation – which is a complex concept – start with simple rules around how to approach food. Focus on rules regarding what foods are okay to touch with fingers, how to reject a food in an acceptable manner and how much moving around is okay while seated at the table. Although you know your son knows these rules, you need to help him create a habit of abiding by them rather than ignoring them. Establishing that habit depends on two things: the first is ensuring success; the second is holding a boundary around your limits – and we'll get to that in a minute.

Ensuring success means you must set the bar low enough that your son can feel like he's done what you expect of him. For example, if he hates the fork, rather than insisting he use it all the time, give him some foods he can eat with his fingers as well. Give him a small portion of fork food, only require him to eat a few bites, reinforce his success and his compliance when he does, and then allow him to eat finger food for the rest of the meal. Even if your son only eats a few bites with his fork, when you repeat this pattern everyday and he experiences success, he is learning that he is a person who eats fork-foods with a fork, which would represent a shift in the way you all see him. It's a lot more fun to feel successful than to fail constantly (this is true even if your son is all smiles and giggles in his moments of defiance).

When you lower the bar in this way, you give him a chance to have a positive experience in relation to structure. Approach sitting at the table in the same way. If you know he can consistently spend five minutes in his seat, but ten is a struggle, hold sit-down meals to five minutes and then declare it a success. Everyday that your son makes it through four bites from the fork or five minutes at the table, he is building a habit of using his skills of self-regulation and control. As his skill increases, you can gradually raise the bar – but go slowly. Remember you are building a habit and that takes time. In general, you want to think about giving him a least a week between incremental increases in your expectations and more at the beginning when you're just establishing a new pattern.

The second key to creating new patterns comes into play on those days when he refuses to use the fork for even

one bite, or when he flees the breakfast table, bagel in hand and eyes sparkling with the thrill of defiance. It will be easier to remain calm if you have a plan of action for such moments before they happen. And you want to be calm; you want your response to his defiance to convey a sense that you have faith in the rules, and your ability to maintain them. That's the feeling of safety for him. When you can maintain the boundaries, it's safe for him to test them – even if the result isn't so pleasant in the moment.

So when your son runs up against one of your mealtime boundaries, and then runs right over it, give him one very specific reminder, and a warning: "Okay, you are up and out of your seat, but it's mealtime, you need to sit back down. We've got three more minutes to go. If you can't eat your bagel in your chair, I am going to take it away." (By the way, taking a particular food away is a variably effective consequence depending on how motivated a child is by a certain food, and how stimulated he is in the moment. You will need to be prepared to simply, calmly, end the meal the second time your son gets up.) If he's not used to this happening, he will be surprised and upset. Reassure him that you can try again together at the next sit-down meal.

If your son has a more strong-willed nature, you can expect him to test your ability to hold the boundary by violating it intentionally over the next several meals. He will really need your consistency during those times, if you are intermittent in enforcing the boundary, your son will have to keep testing it and you will lose the sense of structure required to establish a habit.

In order to accommodate short meals and maintain consistency around your boundaries, you will also have to separate nutritional goals from behavioral goals when it comes to mealtimes while you work on the latter. While you do this, you may have to rely on snack time in the car seat on the way to the park to get more calories into your son for a while, and that's a good thing too. Snacks offer a low-stress opportunity for eating and helps break up the association between food and tension.

A couple final points to consider: before you change the way you've been handling mealtimes, it will be helpful talk to your son about the changes you are making and why. Tell him mealtimes have been hard and you are going to make them better. And when he does transgress a boundary and you enforce a consequence, remember to consider that a success as well. Perhaps it's not the fun kind of success in your visions of pasta and harmony, but it is the rules-matter-and-we-can-do-this kind of success that paves the way to that vision.

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Emotionally Intelligent Discipline

Wednesday 30 June
7:00-9:00pm

In order for discipline to be truly effective, it has to help a child learn how to regulate and appropriately express emotions as well as control behavior. Because of the goal of discipline is for a child to internalize a sense of appropriate vs. inappropriate behavior and ultimately moral action, discipline has to be relationally relevant. We will discuss effective ways to set limits, deliver emotionally supportive guidance and foster the development of a healthy sense of self in your child in the toddler and preschool years.

@ GetzWell Pediatrics
1701 Church Street
San Francisco CA
RSVP: reception@getzwell.com

GetzWell members:
\$20/person or \$30/couple
non-members:
\$40/person or \$60/couple

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Private presentations

Private presentation for groups of eight or more can be arranged by appointment. For more details, email us at: symbio@symbiosf.com

Cover kids wanted!

We love photos of our young clients. If you have photos you are willing to share on our website or newsletter, please email them to us at: symbio@symbiosf.com