

All the Help I Can Get

Thoughts on Parenting, Dinner, and the Let's Talk Tablemat



“No you can’t wear sandals and that sundress today, honey. Summer is over. It’s fall now—October. It’s too cold,” I say. “But I like to be cold,” says my 4-year-old daughter. I take her outside. She says she’s not cold even though I can see goosebumps on her sleeveless arms. I ask her if she can see our breath when we talk. She seems amazed and delighted to notice this, even as she starts to shiver slightly. I ask her if she feels cold yet. She says yes. “Let’s go put on some warmer clothes,” I say. She’s agreeable, even though it means taking off her favorite dress and comfy sandals. Change is tough when you’re four-and-a-half. And, on some mornings, getting dressed takes a very long time.

As the season turns from summer to fall here in Minneapolis, the rate of change inside my house continues to astonish me. My two young daughters have educated me on the subject of human development unlike any of the latest research I try to keep up with in my professional life in the Education & Outreach Department of Planned Parenthood. Take the human brain, for example. [David Walsh, Ph.D.](#) is an expert on adolescent brain development. He says that our brains don’t really become “adult” until the age of about 25. Walsh has helped us understand that the way our brains grow and develop is truly elegant and amazing, and that it takes a very long time. And the resulting behavior during childhood and adolescence? Sometimes, in the challenging moments of parenthood, things don’t seem exactly elegant and amazing. As a parent, I need all the help I can get!

Fortunately, Minnesota is full of people who support parents and families. Researchers, scientists, physicians, and other impressive people are working hard on expanding our knowledge about what is good for kids and families. Over at the University of Minnesota they’re working on something called [Project EAT](#) (Eating Among Teens). Their studies, among others, show that the simple act of regularly sharing a family meal could be one of the most important things we can do to contribute to the health and well-being of children as they grow. Children in families who eat together generally enjoy healthier food, but they are healthier in other ways too. They tend to do better in school, are less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs, less likely to have eating disorders or be overweight, less likely to be depressed, more likely to wait longer to have sex, and more likely to have a positive view of the future. Such a simple thing to do: eat dinner as a family.

OK, so I know this stuff because of the work I do. But putting it into practice – that’s the tricky part. I’m constantly trying to get my intentions to match my behavior as a parent. For example, I intend to breeze home after a rewarding day at work and put an appealing and nutritious meal on the table over which my family enjoys each other’s company and talks about the day. What actually occurs is that I dash home later than I’d like, sling a store-bought meatloaf in the microwave while taking off my coat, take the crying baby from my husband, take a moment to explain for the one hundredth time the virtues of asking nicely for something to my 4-year-old (who whines about the

meatloaf), feed myself while also feeding my 9-month-old who spreads her mooshy baby food all over her face, hands, hair and ears, and then herd the dishes to the sink. I almost always feel rushed and frazzled. But when we are sitting down together at dinner, things feel a bit more orderly and manageable. And we talk and connect with each other. And it feels good.

I'm happy to have a job that enriches my personal life as much as it does. Not only is the most recent research on parent-child connectedness and healthy youth development at the ready, I've also got practical tools to use from day to day. Take the *Let's Talk Tablemat*, a conversation-starter tool. It supports communication and connection at mealtime. Any family member can pick a question such as *What do you like about being your age?* or *What can you do to be a good friend?* Everybody takes a turn answering. I think even my four-year-old would get into it, and I would love to hear her answers instead of the by now all-too-familiar whining! I fully intend to take it home and put it on my table, along with the reheated leftover meatloaf.

Parenting is a challenge. There is a daily-ness to it that sometimes feels overwhelming. My life is full. But I do *like* a challenge. Monday morning it was the sundress and sandals; this morning I had to talk my daughter out of wearing her snowpants and boots to school, which mostly takes place indoors. (And even though this is Minnesota in October, it hasn't yet snowed.) "We'll wear those things when we go sledding in the winter," I say. My daughter starts whining in protest, but I keep it upbeat. "Let's go find your jeans and sparkly shoes."

We eventually make it out the door. We go off into the world. We'll come home again tonight for dinner – all of us around the table with the Tablemat in the middle. I have to say, I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

Get the [Let's Talk Tablemat™](#) in English or Spanish.

Let's Eat, Let's Talk . . . Let's See Where It Takes Us!™