

Do you dread taking your children to restaurants? Or do you avoid all but fast food places when the kids are along? It is possible to enjoy a decent meal with your kids, if you follow some simple rules of thumb.

Know Their Limitations

A two-year-old just is not going to be able to behave in a fine French restaurant. Think about how long your kids can sit before you choose a restaurant. A meal with several courses is not going to work for a child who takes two bites and then crawls under the table at home. If you want a quiet meal, with adult conversation, sips of wine and leisurely courses, don't expect your kids to be able to tolerate it.

Prepare Your Child in Advance

If you are going to be eating in a restaurant that is more formal than your child is used to, talk to him or her ahead of time. Explain what will happen and tell the child what kind of behavior is polite. Emphasize the fun you all are going to have tasting different foods and being served by waiters. Talk up the occasion as if it is a wonderful and special treat for all of you.

Bring the Necessities

Pack a bag to take on your dining adventure. Keep some small, new toys in it, some crayons, paper, a small book, as well as infant or toddler silverware, sippy cups, bibs, a wet washcloth in a plastic bag, bottles, and any special food your child will need to eat. Make sure the toys in the bag are relatively quiet and are things that will really entertain the child. Encourage your child to participate in the dining experience by creating place mats for the table with paper you have brought along.

Have an Escape Plan

Understand that sometimes things

just don't work out as planned. Decide in advance what you will do if your child has a meltdown. You and your spouse can take turns walking the child around or sitting in the reception area. It is also important that you find out where the restrooms are as soon as you arrive!

Keep the Food Under Wraps

The worst thing you can do is to let your child snack on crackers,

served when you get your appetizer. Again, he or she will eat it and be ready to go before you even get your fork into your entree.

Order Carefully

Make sure that if you order food for your child from the menu that it will be something he or she will enjoy. If you are in doubt, ask if an item is spicy or sour. Many restaurants will gladly prepare something plain for your child, such as buttered noodles or grilled cheese, even if it is not on the menu. It also pays to order food for yourself that your child might enjoy, so that if he or she does not like his or her food, there will be something to eat.

Make the Most of It

Use the meal as an opportunity to show your child new and exciting things. Talk about the decor of the restaurant, discuss the different kinds of food on the menu, talk about how the food is prepared and, if you are at an ethnic restaurant, talk about the country of origin.

Relax

Remember, you are eating out for enjoyment, so try to have some! Be sure your restaurant experience is fun for the entire family. Talk to your child during the meal and listen to him or her. Tell jokes or stories. Teach your child that a restaurant is a fun and relaxing place to go.

No child is perfect. If your child slurps her spaghetti, spills milk, decides to sit under the table, or needs to go to the restroom six times, it is not the end of the world. Each restaurant trip is a step in a learning process. It will take some time, but eventually your child will learn to sit and eat nicely in restaurants. And if you can have some fun along the way, the process will be much happier for all of you.

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Tips to Enjoy Dining...



Without the Whining

By Brette McWhorter Sember

breadsticks or other tantalizing treats before the real food arrives. Kids have small stomachs. By the time your food comes, your kids will be full and ready to leave. On the other hand, don't order a salad or appetizer for yourself and nothing for the child. If you want to enjoy a salad or appetizer, consider asking your server to bring it at the same time the rest of the food is served.

Never ask to have your child's meal