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Malaysians need no further training or encouragement to savor meal times. Eating is our national past time and no wonder, given the amazing variety of quality, affordable food available here. Dinners are both culinary and social celebrations in our culture and we want our children to enjoy meal times as well.

It's therefore ironic and unfortunate that for many families, meal times are a battle ground, with parents having to fight for every mouthful with their uncooperative child.

Another common complaint from parents is that their children are fussy eaters. Others have a bad habit of wasting food. This is particularly a complaint I hear from middle class and upper class families. One father commented that his children "do not understand what it feels like to be hungry. They don't value their food."

The following are some ideas for how we can help our children develop a healthy attitude towards food and meal times.

1. Make meal time an enjoyable interaction

Just like we do with our adult friends, it's always pleasant to have pleasant meal time conversations. We laugh, we tell stories, we generally have a whale of a time when we "makan".

Most children enjoy having the attention of their parents and so having meal time chats help create a positive vibe around the dinner table. In line with this, adults should turn off the TV and hand-phones during dinner so that the family have your undivided attention. When you show that you take meal time seriously, so will your children.

Keep the conversation cheerful and light if possible. Get the children to share stories about their day. In turn, we can share about interesting things we've experienced or read. It's always wonderful to see a family enjoying each other's company around a good meal.

2. Involve them in food preparation

Many children waste food, or take it for granted because they don't understand how much effort was put into preparing the food.

By getting involved in the process of cooking and preparing the food you give them an opportunity to invest in the process.

Most young children will jump at the chance to help in the kitchen. After all, children 3 year and above are fiercely independent and want to prove that they can do "adult" things by themselves. Of course for safety reasons we can keep this child friendly.

The process can begin in the supermarket with shopping for food. Give your child a shopping list if they can read and have them search for items in the different aisles. It's a scavenger hunt of sorts.

I know of parents who get their children to help them grow spices in their gardens and get them to pluck onions and chillis for dinner.

Older kids can help with the cooking and baking.

At the end of the whole process, not only will the children have learned a bit more about food preparation, but they will appreciate the food a lot more and will be less likely to waste it during meal time.

3. Setting good examples

Some parents are fussy eaters themselves. If you think about it, there are many times we complain about food not being up to our standard. Malaysians on the whole can be a very particular bunch, always commenting on the quality of our favorite dishes.

The risk is that if we complain constantly in front of our children we send them the message that it's

okay to reject food when it is not to our exact preference or tastes.

Conversely if we model a healthy enjoyment of food chances are our children will adopt the same attitude as well.

4. Celebrate variety

If we want our children to be more versatile in their eating habits and to be more open to new dishes and tastes, then we as a family need to be less conservative when it comes to food.

Make it a point to try different cuisine from different cultures once every week. I know a family who makes it a point to try a new dish every week. They download recipes of the internet and they cook it at home. The children get to choose what country's food they will try out for that week. It's fun for the whole family and it reinforces the message that in the family we learn to enjoy and adjust to new tastes.

5. Get them to pick their portions

A common battle parents fight with their kids is getting them to finish food when they claim to be already full. This is a delicate balancing act. On one hand parents want to ensure that their children are eating enough and on the other hand they don't want them to overeat when they are really full.

By the age of 6 or 7 most children are old enough to decide on the size of their portions. In other words, let the child decide how much food they put on their plates. The rule can be that whatever you put in your plates should be finished. This practice encourages the child not to waste but also teaches them to be responsible for their own appetites.

***This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010***