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PART 1

FACES (NOT DEVICES) AT THE TABLE

By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA

Family meals nourish not only our bodies but also our social skills. Social skills — the ability to hold conversations, share ideas, be considerate of others, and be part of a group — wither when electronic devices come to the table. This you know: The addiction to devices is a formidable social problem that afflicts children and adults, whether or not they have autism, SPD, or other neurodevelopmental challenges.

At dinner time, how can we entice our family members to turn off devices and tune in to discussions? Here are ten suggestions to engage everyone at the table, with more ideas to come in future *Autism Digest* issues.

UNSCRAMBLE

Patricia Shaw, OTR, places bowls filled with letter tiles in the center of the table. Everyone is invited to scoop out a handful of tiles and arrange them into words. Do this while waiting for dinner to come to the table, or between

the entree and dessert. On-line, you can buy inexpensive tiles (e.g., 500 for \$10.00).

DOODLE BEFORE DINNER

Another one of Patricia's ideas is to cover the tablecloth with a plastic sheet and provide markers. As folks gather

around the table, they doodle on the plastic and talk to one another about their drawings and scribbles.

READING DINNER

Donna Henderson, PsyD, a clinical neuropsychologist and co-author of *Is This Autism?*, enjoyed "Reading Dinner"



Patricia Shaw's
Thanksgiving
dinner table

along with her husband and their three children as they were growing up. Once a week, everyone brought a real book to the table and read quietly while eating. Donna says, "This helped build a reading culture. Usually, our children don't get to see us read for fun, because we often do it at bedtime when they are asleep. It also helped generate conversation, because inevitably someone would read something interesting or funny that would lead to a lively discussion."

drdonnahenderson.com and isthisautism.com

CONVERSATION SEEDS

Sarah Wayland, PhD, founder of Guiding Exceptional Parents and co-author of *Is This Autism?*, suggests two questions to get kids engaged. Ask, "What happened today that was unexpected?" A second question is, "What is your advice for this sticky problem I'm struggling with?" For kids who are constantly being told how to behave and what to say, how delightful it must be to respectfully tell their grown-ups what to do! GuidingExceptionalParents.com and isthisautism.com

SOCIAL STEPS

Sarah also shares what has worked in her home. "We let our Very Active Kiddo stand at the table while eating. (Sitting was Just. Too. Much.) We didn't demand that he stay at the table for longer than 10, maybe 15 minutes if we were lucky. On the table, there was always something to eat that he liked, served alongside the food that the rest of us were eating." To make dinnertime enticing, keep it amiable, keep it short, keep it tasty.

ROSE AND THORN

Katie Stern, Certified Grief Educator and future social worker, and her family take turns at the dinner table to answer the question, "What's your rose of the day, and what's your thorn?" Whereas a broad question like "What happened at school today?" typically gets "Nothing" as a reply, a specific question about one nice thing and one not-so-good thing is easier to answer. For instance, you may hear the glad news that your child was selected to be line leader and the sad news that the class mouse died — events that really matter to your child.

RACE TRACK

Karin R. Varblow, MD, a pediatrician and expert in neurodivergence and



ADHD, invented this idea when her two kids were unable to sit through a meal. She says, "They were both really into race cars (the *Cars* movie was big back then). In order to get them to eat, I created a 'race track' around the first floor of my central-hall colonial house. The kitchen table was where they had 'pit stops.' They had to take a bite, chew, swallow, and show me an empty mouth before they could proceed to the next lap. This would continue until they had eaten their whole dinners, and they loved it! (Importantly, I staggered their start times so they were never in competition.)" drkarinmd.com

PASSION TOPICS

Julie F. Skolnick, MA, JD, founder of With Understanding Comes Calm and author of *Gifted and Distractible*, encourages parents "to do a little research into a passion topic for their child and then start having a conversation in front of their child about the cool facts they read in an article. If parents choose a 'hot topic', children naturally engage because they are curious. It's a low stakes, low pressure way to get a child to engage." withunderstandingcomescalm.com and GiftedandDistractible.com

DAD JOKES

Julie has another suggestion: "Find funny 'Dad jokes' to share without asking the child to listen. Just start telling the joke, and even if your child rolls their eyes, at least they are no longer looking at a screen. This is a great way for a child to 'choose' to participate in a family meal. It is also great for the child who has Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) as part of her profile." (Often occurring in people with autism, PDA compels them to try to control their

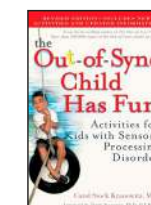
environment by adamantly refusing to engage in everyday routines.)

SOMETHING FOUND

A third idea from Julie, which she suggests at her weekly Parent Planning Sessions, is to share something they found that they can show or talk about at the dinner table. A penny on the sidewalk ... an article about bees ... a memory.... Julie says, "Eventually the child engages at dinner, and parents don't have to do so much front end work!" ■



Carol is the author of the "Sync" series, including *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun* (Perigee, 2006) and *Good Times with Out-of-Sync Grandkids* (Sensory World, 2025).



Visit her websites

www.out-of-sync-child.com
and www.insyncchild.com
to learn more.

Dear Readers — do you have some suggestions of your own? Please send them to carolkranowitz@gmail.com for consideration for another article about bringing your family members' attention and faces to the table.