

Features

FAMILY: Manners maketh family

Emma Pomfret

1020 words

18 March 2006

[Birmingham Post](#)

48

English

(c) 2006 Birmingham Post & Mail Ltd

Going "back to basics" may have left former Tory leader John Major scratching his head in bafflement, but Emma Pomfret discovers its the mantra for a growing number of modern parents

Despite fears that modern manners are all but extinct these days, the vast majority of British households are turning back the clock and returning to old-fashioned family values in a bid to instill more discipline in their children.

A recent survey discovered that a staggering 75 per cent of British parents admit their children leave a lot to be desired when it comes to good table manners.

Nearly a third of parents surveyed said they found licking the plate the most appalling table behaviour.

About half of those quizzed admitting being concerned that their children were not taught to eat properly in social situations.

However, 80 per cent of families do make an effort to sit down to a family meal at least three times a week.

What's more, nine out of ten see it as a vital bonding experience - although many parents feel that this is not enough and wish that they could eat together more frequently.

The research comes on the back of the Government's "respect" policy, and offers an alternative view to current perceptions of declining standards, according to Sarah Taylor, communications manager for Harvester, the company that commissioned the survey.

"Parents seem to support our approach that mealtimes are key when it comes to children's social development and family bonding - and though it is clear all parents feel table manners still have an important role to play in today's society, it was interesting for us to see that responses differ significantly regionally or due to gender," she explains.

"It was also interesting to see that mothers are 50 per cent more likely than fathers to find belching at the table offensive, and at a regional level, Welsh parents were unlikely to have a problem with children licking the plate, whilst in the North parents found this to be extremely rude behaviour," Taylor adds.

TAG

The Advocate Group Pte Ltd

"Parents say that sitting and eating together is the best place to start helping their children learn what is acceptable as they eat up their meals," explains Lucy Lloyd, head of communications at the National Family And Parenting Institute.

"Most parents want to make mealtimes fun - about sharing the good times, celebration and happiness in family life - as well as helping children learn about food and how to eat it," she says.

Suzie Hayman, relationship counsellor and spokesperson for Parentline Plus, agrees.

"I think we are talking about children's socialisation, respect and communication issues as opposed to just good manners.

"It is about getting your children to understand how they would like others to behave in front of them, and vice versa," she says. "It is not only about sitting up straight, having clean nails and keeping your mouth shut whilst eating, but about learning how these traits make them appear to society and how they implicate a general lack of respect for other people.

"In fact, all of the things that we think of as good manners, being polite, looking at people when you are talking to them, answering back are actually about family bonds and good communication," she adds.

The very best way to encourage children to naturally adopt good manners - whether at the table or in other social situations - is for families to make a concerted effort to spend more time as a unit, including eating together, Hayman says.

"The root of bad table manners can be traced back to kids being allowed to eat their dinners in front of the television, or when everybody in the family eats their meals at different times throughout the evening," she explains.

"It is frightening how many families don't have a dining table anymore," Hayman says.

"Increasingly busy lives also promote bad habits within families, and what often happens is that meal times are staggered, with mum leaving meals for the family to microwave themselves."

But rather than endlessly lecturing your children about practising good table manners, a technique which is unlikely to produce positive results, the best action that a parent can take is to actually invest in a dining table.

"At least that way the whole family can eat together at least once or twice a week, and the kids will learn by their parents' example what is and isn't socially acceptable.

"This is far more effective than trying to tell children in the abstract that they must not lick their plates or shout at the table," Hayman advises.

"Say things like 'how would you like it if your friend sat opposite and ate with their mouth open?' and encourage them to treat people how they would like to be treated.

Hayman says that sitting down to eat as a family promotes good manners in general.

TAG

The Advocate Group Pte Ltd

"You learn to talk, you learn to share things, you learn to listen, you learn about your family and what everybody else is doing and feeling, and you learn to communicate - all of which are the cornerstones of good manners," she says.

For further information about good parenting go to parentlineplus.org.uk.

Or go to the National Family And Parenting Institute at nfpi.org. Living with a Teenager: A Survival Guide for Parents, by Suzie Hayman (Piatkus Books, £7.99).

Table manners around Britain:

96 per cent of parents in the North think that using a knife and fork is the most important aspect of table etiquette compared to only 72 per cent from the South East.

Parents in the South West are best at nagging their children about table manners, the highest in the survey.

Parents in the West Midlands are the least likely to say that sitting up at the table, finishing what is on your plate, waiting for everyone else and speaking with your mouth full is important.

A massive 96 per cent of Welsh parents say eating together as a family is an important bonding experience - four per cent higher than the national average.