

Dining out with children

Dining out at restaurants can be an enjoyable activity and a break from kitchen duties at home. Many people in the United States dine out at least once a week. According to a Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey, 58 percent of American adults say they visit a restaurant during the week.

Even busy families want to indulge. However, parents of young children may avoid restaurants because of apprehension about the experience. Getting ready for the restaurant excursion can help families avoid some of the common pitfalls. Patience and planning can help dining out with the family go smoothly.

Infants: New parents often need a respite from the near-constant demands of infants. Dining out can be one of those breaks. When a babysitter is unavailable or if you're not yet comfortable leaving a little one with someone else, bringing baby along may be possible.

First, find a family-friendly restaurant or try an establishment that has outdoor seating where you can quickly distance yourself from other diners if need be. Time dining out around the baby's feeding and sleeping schedule. Babies sated by a recent feeding and a relaxing car ride may be more inclined

to sleep through your restaurant meal. Just in case, pack an extra bottle or prepare to breastfeed to keep your baby happy.

Toddlers and school age: Active children can learn table manners and restaurant behavior early on through practice. These lessons can open children up to new food experiences and help them grow accustomed to social settings.

Do not set your child up to fail by selecting a restaurant that is too fancy or quiet. Save those restaurants for when your company is adults only. A place that is used to noise (and moderate mess) is better.

A restaurant that has interesting decor, such as an aquarium, can keep toddlers occupied. But bring along some games, toys and other trinkets to keep their attention. Try playing games, such as counting the packets of sugar or finding people wearing red shirts.

Avoid dining out with a tired child, and be prompt in selecting meals and eating. This is not a time to linger, as youngsters' attention spans and willingness to sit still tend to be minimal. Be prepared to leave with a to-go box if a child proves unruly.

Older children: Part of the challenge of



dining out with older children is holding their attention, but meals can facilitate family conversation and be good for the parent-child dynamic. Set a device-free rule at the table and use the opportunity to converse. Try exotic

cuisine or new dining experiences so it is an adventure for all involved.

Dining out with children requires different strategies depending on their ages.

How to manage cooking for a crowd

Hosting family and friends for special occasions requires a lot from the host and hostess, who must prepare their homes for guests or find establishments capable of catering to large parties. For hosts inviting people into their homes, the task of preparing homemade meals adds to their list of responsibilities.

Cooking for a crowd can be rewarding. Hosts can see the fruits of their labors on the faces of their satisfied guests, and few things make guests feel more welcome than a homecooked meal. Managing such a large undertaking can be difficult, but there are ways to simplify cooking for a crowd.

• **Do the math beforehand.** Hosts who are

preparing a favorite recipe but on a much grander scale than they're accustomed to should take some time in advance of the big day to determine the equivalent amounts of each ingredient they will need. Write the recipe down and mark it as "serves 25" or however many guests you're inviting, storing it away so you won't have to break out the calculator the next time you host. Once you have figured out the equivalent volumes, check the cupboard to ensure you have enough of each ingredient to prepare the meal.

• **Serve something familiar.** One of the joys of cooking is experimenting with new cuisine. However, when cooking for a crowd, hosts might want to stick to a dish they have prepared in the

past. That familiarity can make cooks feel more comfortable and relaxed when the cooking commences. In addition, cooks may rest easier knowing they're about to serve a dish they have perfected as opposed to something they have never before tried.

• **Start prep work early.** Begin prep work as early as possible. Depending on the dish being prepared, it might be hard to get too much done more than a day in advance of the festivities. But even removing small tasks from the docket can save cooks time come the big day. If possible, pour out ingredients in the adjusted increments in advance of the big day. Though it seems like a simple task, stopping to pour out each individual ingredient come the big day can take a substantial amount of time.

• **Share the responsibilities.** Hosts can make their tasks more manageable by sharing the responsibilities of hosting. For example, hosts who are handling the cooking should not also feel responsible to clean their homes. Enlist a spouse, child or even a loved one attending the festivities to handle the chores you don't have time for. By sharing the responsibilities, hosts will ensure no one person is overwhelmed and party prep will go that much faster.

Cooking for a crowd can be exhausting. But hosts can employ several strategies to simplify the process of preparing a large meal for many people.

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