

TABLE TALK TOPICS

Conversations don't all have to be serious - they shouldn't be. But here are some serious themes to weave into your dinnertime conversations.

Table Manners

It's easy to think that table manners don't matter that much for a casual meal with the family. But the family dinner table is the best place to teach good habits so they become second nature to your kids when they are at a restaurant, at someone else's home or later, when they're dating. All you have to do is model your own good table manners and then provide reminders as you go along: *David, please wipe your mouth with your napkin, not your sleeve. Katie, please pass the potatoes after you serve yourself. Brent, please chew your food quietly and keep your mouth closed. Emaly, please don't talk with food in your mouth.*

Talking about addiction

Is there a drug problem at your school? If anyone came up to you and offered to sell you drugs, what would you say? Have you made up your mind already not to use drugs?

Be careful with pornography. Friends of yours may want to show you porn photos, videos, and Internet sites, but this is an addiction that you don't want to get started on. Those images never leave your mind.

What do you say to someone who wants you to come over and get drunk with them? Have a cigarette? Let's talk about making up your mind now about what you will do when the situation arises.

Respecting your parents and authority

Define and discuss your family morals and family values. Ask your child how he would respond if a teacher or other authority figure asked him to do something he didn't want to do. Help your

child come up with respectful ways to ask clarifying questions when he doesn't understand an instruction. If your child feels that he's being treated unfairly, tell him not to react and talk back—you will discuss the problem with him and then decide what to do.

Forgiveness

Share a story from your past about how forgiving someone helped you grow that relationship. Ask your child what forgiveness means to her. *How do you forgive someone? Why is it important to forgive? How does it help you?*

Budgeting/Debt

How can we as a family live within our budget? Talk about what the budget should include so kids can see there is only so much money to go around.

Gratitude

What are you grateful for? Make a short list of all the things everyone is grateful for around your dinner table some night. (You may be surprised at how grateful they are for the little things in life.)

Accountability

Let's talk about how important it is to be accountable for your actions. Let's talk about how you have to take responsibility for your actions. How did you do today in school? On a test? Were you nice to your friends? Did you clean up your room? Did you use up all the gas in the car? Did you let other kids drive your dad's car? Where are you going after school? What kind of kids are you going to choose to hang out with?

Service to others

We can feel good about ourselves when we give of our time and talents helping others in need. When we spend our days just fulfilling our own needs and worrying about our own problems, we forget that others are even worse off. We forget about how hard it is for the many people in life who are disabled, homeless, lonely, hungry, or just down and out for the time being. Let's look around our family (or neighborhood or community) to see whom you can cheer up or how we can help a friend in need. Sometimes all it takes is a listening ear and a smile!

Dream list of places to visit

Talk with your family about places you could go as a family and vacations that would be within your family budget. Help family members reach a goal to visit a place that is very meaningful to them. Talk about what you have learned about other countries. On Italian Night or Mexican Night, talk about something interesting you have learned about Italy or Mexico.

Kindness

Talk about stories that have happened at school or in the family to illustrate how kindness makes a difference in our lives.

Saying you're sorry

From the time your children are young, talk about how they can say they're sorry on a regular basis. Examples in the home are enough to practice by—if they have hurt another sibling, or said a mean word, or stepped on someone, or spilled milk, or snapped at a parent. (Parents, we need to say we are sorry too, as much as the kids do.)

Dating

Talk openly about what you will expect when your kids are old enough to date. Go over the rules so they are cemented in the kids' minds before they ever start dating. Talk openly about how you feel a boy should treat a girl on a date, and vice versa. Tell them stories of your dating experiences. Keep the communication open at all times about where they will be going and what time they will be coming home. Don't encourage kids to date at an early age. Talk about the pitfalls of birth control and what this practice might lead to. Talk about abstinence in sexual behavior and what the rewards might be because of it. Talk openly together as a family so that each child knows what is expected of him or her.

Honesty

Talk about how the truth will always set you free, that the real truth always comes out even if it takes many years. I always told my kids that as long as we were all telling the truth, there would never be a problem that could not be fixed. Telling the truth and trying to keep those little white lies to a minimum is the best practice. Being true to oneself is most important, and then being true at all times with our siblings, parents, and others.

Work ethic

Talk about what jobs are expected of the children around the house. Talk about keeping your word, being on time, giving your employer a full day's work, and not abusing the system.

Saying "I love you"

We all need to hear loving statements from the people we care about. The way to do this as a family is for the parents to set the example, by getting into the habit of saying "I love you" to each other first, and then to the kids on a daily basis. Your children will not be able to help returning the sentiment of "I love you too."

You'll find conversation starter questions throughout this book.