When it comes to managing mealtimes – What kind of a parent are you?

Managing what food to put on the table is challenging enough without having to manage who is around the table. According to Dr. Sharon Robinson, Associate Professor and Nutrition Specialist, with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, “There are three approaches to parenting that influence children’s eating behavior: parent centered, child centered and balanced”.

If you take the parent centered approach, or authoritarian, then you may restrict the type and/or amount of food your child can eat. For example, you might have a no junk food policy at your house. Another clue you may have a parent centered approach is if you stick to strict meal and snack times. Also you may expect your child to eat all of the food on their plate – a clean plate rule. One problem with this approach is that children often desire the foods they cannot have and will often overeat when offered restricted foods. Children who are required to finish all of the food on their plate may develop a habit of overeating which could lead to unwanted weight gain over time.

The child centered approach (also known as permissive) to mealtime is very unstructured. Children decide what they want to eat and when they want to eat. They will often forage in the kitchen for food. This approach to parenting can be a problem when children pick foods that are not very healthy resulting in overall decrease in nutritional intake. Also children may not learn proper table manners and how to make dinner conversation.

The balanced approach to managing mealtimes is also called authoritative. It can be thought of as a happy median between the parent and the child approaches. Parents with a balanced approach:

- Offer meals and snacks regularly throughout the day thereby allowing children to feel secure
- Provide a variety of healthful foods from which children are allowed to select
- Introduce new foods 11 to 12 times to allow children ample time to warm up to unfamiliar foods
- Create a positive mealtime atmosphere by not commenting about food not eaten or making negative statements about the child
- Are good role models.
The Texas AgriLife Extension Service offers free and low-cost nutrition and health classes and other events. To find out what is available in your area, please contact your local county Extension agent.