

Dinner Discussions

(Some of My Best Friends Are Pickles!)

Pickles? Did you say pickles? Yes, ridiculous, isn't it? That would be a line I borrowed from my Dad. Growing up, when one of us kids would proclaim intense dislike for a certain food item, Dad, in a slightly offended manner, would say, "Some of my best friends are pickles (or broccoli, or spinach, or etc.)." This saying generally happened around the family dinner table. As an adult, I determined from this experience that kids remember things discussed at dinner time.

In addition to pickles being best friends, I also learned these maxims and lessons:

- All four on the floor (chair legs)
- Don't talk with your mouth full
- Put it down and cut it up
- Mabel, Mabel get your elbows off the table, this is not a horse's stable.
- Please pass the...
- Thank you.
- Eat salad with every dinner
- Don't lick your dessert plate unless Dad is not home.
- Take time to know what happened in someone else's day.
- Know what is going on in the world of politics.
- Ridiculous conversation drives Mom crazy.
- Give thanks for the food you eat.
- Dinnertime may be the only time all day that the family is all together.

I tend to get a little bent out of shape when too many things crowd in to our family dinner time. There are some very good reasons for this. I found a couple of reasons in the following quote:

"The number of those who report that their "whole family usually eats dinner together" has declined 33 percent. This is most concerning because the time a family spends together "eating meals at home [is] the strongest predictor of children's academic achievement and psychological adjustment.'" (Anderson and Doherty, *Family Relations*, 54:655.)

Academic achievement and psychological adjustment are reason enough to hold family dinner time, but there are actually many more reasons as well. However, these reasons suit my purposes here because we are, as usual, discussing the education of our children.

Dinner time can be one of the greatest places for teaching our kids. When I am really with it, I have in mind ideas of good places to steer the conversation. Sometimes my grand ideas completely fizz, but other times we have remarkably interesting discussions.

Obviously, it is sometimes good to just let whatever topics come up be the topic for discussion. However, life with kids has taught me to appreciate my Mom's continual plea at the dinner table: "Can we please have some intelligent conversation?" As kids, we were excited when my older sister learned the formula "E=mc squared". After that, whenever Mom played her intelligent conversation card we would all counteract her by chanting, in unison, that intelligent sounding formula. Yes, we were little stinkers, but it has become a fun family joke.

With thoughts of intelligence in mind, I would like to offer a few ideas for "intelligent conversation" starters at the dinner table. You can print out the list to hang up or to cut out and put the strips in a jar to pull out at random if you would like.

- Discuss upcoming political elections
- Talk about the metric system. Break out the rulers and see how long a spaghetti noodle is. How about the length of a pea? Or the tines of your fork?
- What is everyone's favorite book for the week?
- Leo Buscaglia was required by his father at dinner time to bring one thing that he had learned that day. He knew never to come without something in mind because he would always be asked. So, what did you learn today?
- Play the Add-a-Word sentence game where everyone takes a turn adding just one word to complete a sentence. This can be funny yet educational as people try to think of clever adjectives, interesting verbs and ear-tickling nouns!
- How many countries can you think of that start with "A?" "B?" "C...?"
- Play 20 questions
- Who can quote a poem, scripture, quotable quote or speech?
- Let's try to memorize the Gettysburg Address
- What would your dream house look like? Let's invent one together.
- What is your earliest memory?
- Share stories from when you, your parents or grandparents were small.
- Where would you most like to travel to?
- What do you think it would be like to grow up as an Eskimo in Alaska, in the interior parts of Africa, in the Outback of Australia, or in Siberia.
- Talk about trends-what used to be, what is now and what trends have come around again?
- How many genres of music can you name?
- Who can name music artists from the '50's?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- What are the most important things in life?
- Discuss genealogy. How many extended family members can you name? Ancestors? Where did they come from?
- Bring a few new words to the table and see if anyone has any idea what they mean. How about anti-disestablishmentarianism? Debonair? Redundant?
- Who is the most determined person you know? Why? What have they accomplished?

- Play “I’m going on a picnic”. First person starts by saying, “I’m going on a picnic and bringing apples.” Next person says, “I’m going on a picnic and bringing apples and bananas.” Next person says, “I’m going on a picnic and bringing apples, bananas and cashews.” Etc.
- If you could have lunch with anyone in the world, who would it be and why?
- If you could talk to a fictitious character to whom would you speak?
- If you had to turn into an animal, what animal would it be and why?
- Tell jokes. Just beware if you start on the knock-knock jokes!
- What do you love about America?
- Talk about kings. How many can you name? Were they good rulers? What were some strengths and weaknesses? How should a good leader behave?
- Talk about finances. What things do you do well? Where can you improve? What is a budget? How does debt work against you? What’s credit?
- What kinds of natural disasters are there? Do you remember when Mt. St. Helens erupted? How about Hurricane Katrina? What can we learn from natural disasters? How can we be prepared?
- Talk about current events. What is making the headlines this week?
- Talk about businesses. What is retail? What is wholesale? What is the stock market?
- How many sports can you name? What is going on in the world of sports right now? Which sports are not currently part of the Olympics?
- What’s your favorite restaurant for fast food? For a nice meal? For atmosphere? For hanging out? For liquid refreshment? For dessert?
- Who can name 31 flavors of ice cream?
- Discuss advertising. How many jingles & slogans can you remember? What are the effects of advertising? Why do companies spend millions of dollars on advertising?
- Name all the things you can think of that were invented in the last 50 years. 10 years? 5 years? This year?
- Can you name the seven wonders of the world?
- Who can make up the most unusual animal? Describe it for us.

Feel free to add to the list on your own or you are welcome to email me your great suggestions too! I am always on the lookout for new ideas.

Have great dinners this week! Anybody want a pickle?

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