

Eating Out With Kids: The 10 Commandments



Make restaurant visits less gruelling with these tips from an expert.

by Kate Winn

I love eating out. I enjoy the atmosphere of restaurants. I appreciate the fact that everyone can choose their own meal. And I really like not having to cook or clean up. Because of this, our daughters have been frequenting restaurants since they were only days old. Newborns are the easiest dining companions, so we figured we might as well start them early. The toddler phase is the most trying, but my four-year old daughter is a seasoned pro, so it's definitely worth the effort to train your kids.

Eating out with little ones may rank right up there for you with a root canal or income tax audit, but it doesn't have to be so painful. While certainly not carved in stone (more like scribbled in crayon on a paper placemat), we're hoping these 10 commandments will help you to enjoy your next restaurant experience.

1. Thou shalt do thy research.

One mom, who will remain nameless, wishes she had researched a restaurant before arriving with her newborn. She and a friend took their babies to join some colleagues for dinner, and arrived to find

the restaurant was "fancy, fancy, fancy. There was no room for diaper bags or infant carriers between the tiny, candlelit tables, not to mention the fact that we were horribly underdressed," she recalls in embarrassment. "We ended up giving some excuse about a diaper and making a very ungraceful exit. Fortunately, no one there knew anything about kids, other than knowing, as we should have, that babies did not belong at this event, so they didn't know our excuse was lame."

To avoid making the same mistake, keep the following in mind when choosing the location for your



next family meal out:

- ☉ While chains are often your best bet, don't overlook your local independent restaurants.
- ☉ Phone ahead (loud noises in the background are good) or check the website to see if your chosen restaurant has a kids' menu, booster seats, etc.
- ☉ Find out if there is a special kids-eat-free night.
- ☉ Buffets are quick and popular with picky eaters.
- ☉ If it's local, drop in and have a look before bringing the entire family.

2. Thou shalt prepare.

Follow these tips to help things go smoothly.

- ☉ If your kids are old enough to get it, make a game of playing restaurant at home. Role play ordering meals, eating and manners. Kids love to act out the "don't", followed by a well-praised "do".
- ☉ Make a reservation in advance, and ask for a booth. Sitting through the meal requires enough patience; don't expect kids to sit and wait for a table beforehand. In case of meltdowns, squabbles or

projectile food, a booth affords a bit of privacy.

☛ Make sure your children know the consequences of any misbehaviour, and be prepared to follow through.

☛ If it suits your parenting style, offer a relevant bribe. Some kids' meals come with toys or desserts, which can be enjoyed only if deserved.

☛ Feed babies before you go, if possible. If you will require a warm bottle, you may want to prepare it in advance and bring a thermos, as many restaurants are wary of heating bottles.

☛ Consider inviting the grandparents. This will increase the adult-to-child ratio ... and of course, provide quality time with your extended family.

3. Thou shalt stock the diaper bag.

Even if your kids are out of diapers, it's still a good idea to have necessary supplies on hand.

☛ Bring your own booster seat or infant carrier.

☛ Keep special toys just for restaurants – the broken crayons that may be provided just won't do the trick. Magic pen or

invisible ink sets are portable, fun and stain-free.

☛ Wet wipes aren't just for babies.

☛ Little containers of familiar finger foods will come in handy for toddlers who may boycott the menu or have trouble waiting.

☛ Don't forget the sippy cups: nothing says "whoops!" like a preschooler insisting on drinking her orange pop from a big girl glass.

4. Thou shalt be realistic.

A little touch of practicality will help avoid disasters.

☛ You can't expect to enjoy a meal out with sick or tired kids. Make sure you work around nap and bedtimes as best you can.

☛ Restaurants are also not the place to pick a picky-eater fight. Let kids order something they like, and help explain any special directions to the waitstaff to avoid disasters (e.g., no green stuff on top; orange cheese, not white).

☛ Ask for the kids' meals to be brought out as soon as they're ready, but in the meantime, order an appetizer (or choose a restaurant that provides free bread, always popular with children).

☛ Order your own meal based on the one-handed rule. That is, eat with one hand, so you can attend to your child with the other. My husband has learned the hard way that some of his favourites (fajitas, ribs) are best saved for our kid-free outings.

☛ Restaurants do not expect you to order meals

for very small children. Feel free to share your meal with your toddler, or feed her something from home.

☛ One mom suggests requesting that drinks not be brought until the meals, so that the kids don't fill up before their food arrives.

☛ Ask for extra napkins. Lots.

☛ Be careful what you wish for: one dad requested that the loud restaurant music be turned down, only to find that his baby made up for the difference in decibels. "We got out of there as fast as we could," he says.



Photo: Gerrit Weatherbee

5. Thou shalt enjoy thy family.

This seems obvious. After all, you're at the restaurant together because you want family time, right? Okay, maybe it's just because the babysitter cancelled, but still, make the best of it. Involve your kids in the conversation. Playing with them, reading to them, or just giving them attention in general, especially before the meal arrives, will pay dividends later. Go for a walk while waiting for your meal, discuss the decor, and make sure to hit the washrooms. "This way you don't have to take someone to the loo when you are four bites into your meal," advises mom Caroline Delorme. "And children ALWAYS like to check out the washrooms at restaurants. It's like an unwritten rule."

Out of the (hungry) mouths of babes

Kids share their favourite restaurants:

"Pizza Hut is my favourite ... the food is yummy!" *Ethan*

"I like Montana's because I like all of the outdoor stuff and they give you good colouring sheets." *Madison*

"Rainforest Cafe is the best because there are so many things for kids to see there." *Sarah*

"I like any place that has a buffet and you can go back as much as you want!" *Hunter*

"I always want to go to Red Lobster because the waitresses are so nice to you, and they have biscuits." *Mackenzie*

"East Side Mario's has awesome food, free bread and fun things to do while you're waiting for your meal." *Jack*

"I like Wild Wing because their name is cool, and I like the pictures on their walls and their poutine!" *Lucia*

Speaking of family time, please turn off the Blackberry or cell phone! Unless you are an emergency worker, nothing is so important that it can't wait an hour. And don't try to use the old "the babysitter might be trying to get a hold of me" excuse – it doesn't work when you have your kids with you!

6. Thou shalt honour thy fellow patrons.

Diners at a family restaurant may expect loud voices, babbling and occasional tears, but certainly do not deserve piercing screams at 15 second intervals. Know when to take a walk.

The other patrons also do not want to trip over your children in the aisles or wear their food, so be sure to stay alert, even if you are at a family-friendly establishment.

7. Thou shalt keep it short and sweet.

When your meal arrives, ask for the bill to save you some valuable time later. If you're interested in dessert, order it while eating the main course, or take it to go. Sometimes it tastes much better once the kids are

in bed and the grownups are relaxing. If you want to save money, skip the restaurant dessert and grab a carton of ice cream on the way home.

8. Thou shalt remember thy manners.

After eating, be sure to tidy up as best you can, and leave a tip proportionate to the extra service your family required. One waitress suggests a few extra percent is appropriate depending on the size of the mess left behind.

9. Thou shalt lay the groundwork for the future.

Once the meal ends, be sure to deliver on any promised rewards, and discuss ways to improve for the next time while the experience is fresh in everyone's minds. Mom of two Amanda McInnes made some "notes to self" after her first disastrous outing, such as making sure that her active daughter gets lots of playtime before being expected to sit through a restaurant meal again.

10. Thou shalt repeat.

No matter how terrible your experience was, kids need practice to improve. While you might want to stick to take-out during the potty-training phase, at other times be sure to go back to restaurants often and give the children an opportunity to learn. Besides, my theory is, when you're not doing the cooking or cleaning, how bad could it really be?

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