Various activities and hectic schedules can make family time scarce. Eating breakfast, lunch, or dinner together engages all of the senses: from smelling and tasting good food, to seeing loved ones and hearing their pleasant conversations, to feeling the warmth of a relative or friend’s hand.

A child with special needs can share in family mealtimes and perhaps meal preparation and cleanup activities too. With some small helpful changes, he can participate to his fullest potential—wherever meals take place. If a family gathers around the kitchen table for meals, they should maintain that routine as much as possible.

“The important thing for any child is routine,” explains Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant Diana Hohmann. “No matter where the family is, whether at home, a friend’s house, or a restaurant, it’s important to always begin the meal with the routine. For example, does the child

Family Dinner: More Than Just The Food
have a special seat at the table next to a specific relative?”

This routine should also include boundaries for before, during, and after eating. One of the easiest ways to do this is to show children how much time remains before the meal begins or ends with an audible timer, a clock that shows time with simple sights and sounds, or a visual support system.

Older children who can stand with or without assistance can help with meal preparation by using a wooden platform or special stool to boost them to counter level. “Allow the child with special needs to help out by using plastic or paper cups and plates that won’t damage floors or bang toes if they’re dropped. It’s all about a child’s ability level and the family’s comfort level.”

A child with special needs can also enjoy family meals in other locations with careful planning. “If a family has a child who is oversensitive to sounds or lights, they need to gauge if a restaurant is too loud or too bright beforehand,” she explains.

When choosing a restaurant, look for wheelchair accessibility even if a child does not require a wheelchair. It will be easier to enter and exit the building as well as use the restrooms for toileting, cleaning, and changing needs. Pack a bag with all of the items that help to maintain his routine, including placemats and custom-sized surface reels. FDA-approved “food grade,” non-toxic, latex-free, non-slip vinyl mats are already on the market and provide a secure surface for plates, cups, eating utensils, and other items. Protect clothing with disposable and machine-washable bibs.

For eaters who can easily swallow food, consider using adapted dinnerware such as weighted utensils, utensils with straight or angled forms and non-slippery handles, or cuffed or clip-on utensil holders, designed to adapt standard silverware for children with grasping difficulties.

Scooper plates are great for children with limited muscle control or who have the use of only one hand. The rounded edges prevent overflows and can be used to push food onto cutlery. Unbreakable dinnerware is also available and may be attached to a removable suction pad base that won’t budge on clean, flat surfaces even when bumped. Or, look for plates with foam rubber disks on their backs to help steady them.

Additionally, shatterproof cups that hold hot and cold beverages are available. Try to find ones with textured, slip-resistant, secure grips. Soft nosey cups allow are ideal for children who have limited neck range of motion. A double-handed mug can also make drinking easier and safer for those with weak grasps. Furthermore, it may have a drinking spout to prevent spills.

Even if a child has reflux, allergies, difficulty swallowing, or relies on a feeding tube, Hohmann advises that he can and should be part of his family’s dining rituals. “A child who uses a feeding tube before dinner, for example, can still receive the social and sensory benefits of family dinner time. Moreover, don’t be embarrassed to bring your own food when going to a friend’s house for dinner—or even a restaurant with permission—to accommodate a child with special needs,” she says.

After all, there’s much more to a family meal than just food!

With operations in the United States and Canada, FlagHouse offers more than 20,000 products. It has served public and private sectors for over 50 years, including schools, parks, community centers, healthcare organizations, day treatment and residential care centers, military bases, and individuals. Catalogs include Flying Start™ (ages 2-5), Giant Leaps™ (ages 5-20), Going Strong™ (ages 21 and over), Physical Education & Recreation™, and CATCH® (Coordinated Approach To Child Health). For more information please call 1-800-265-6900 or visit www.Flaghouse.com.