



# Get Your Elbows Off the Table



## A 4-Her's guide to Basic Table Manners

Why do we need good manners? First of all, they insure that guests and hosts are comfortable at the table. They allow for us to make the best possible impression while enjoying good food and good company. In 4-H we are often called upon to attend or host functions that involved food in some way, including nice sit – down dinners. Remember that most etiquette is common sense! Just remember – Think BEFORE you act! Here are some basic tips that will get you through a formal dinner, a first date, or a night at home!

### Getting Started

**Follow the host!** Don't do anything until the host does it first, or instructs you to do so. Sit when the host asks you to, or the host takes their seat. If you are the host, be sure to be mindful of your guests. Don't know who the host is? Take your cue from other diners. The host will generally be the owner of the home, or the one paying for your meal. If it is Dutch treat, the person who instigated the invitation is the host. If you still don't know who is hosting, defer to the oldest person in attendance or at your table.

**Sit up straight.** Try not to slouch or lean back in your chair. DO NOT sprawl your legs out under the table into another diner's space. One should not sit so closely to the table that the elbows are bent like crickets, but not so far back that food is more likely to reach your lap than your mouth.

**What about the napkin?** Upon taking your seat, place your napkin in your lap (it is bad manners to leave your napkin on the table for an extended period of time!) Large napkins should be folded in half and laid in your lap; luncheon size napkins may be left unfolded. Once your napkin is in your lap, it should not touch the table again until the meal is complete! If you must excuse yourself and get up for any reason, leave your napkin in your chair. Your napkin is either directly in the center of your place setting or to your right.

**Identify your space.** Before your food arrives, survey your place setting and identify which utensils are yours! Nothing slows down a meal like having to fish around for the extra fork, because you took your neighbor's! Your forks are lined up to the left of your plate. The drink on the right is yours, just remember: Drink starts with "DR" which stands for "drink right", this is also a helpful

reminder that your bread plate is on your left, because it is opposite your drink. The knife and spoon to the immediate right of your plate are yours. Generally anything directly in front of you within a 18 inches or so is yours – dessert spoons and plates, coffee cups, etc.

**Don't put stuff on the table!** Purses, keys, jackets and papers do not belong on the table. Find an empty chair, place them under the table, or have the wait staff put them in a safe place.

## Time to Eat

**Meals come from the right.** Plates and glasses should always be served at the diner's right and removed at the diner's left.

**Take only one slice/piece of bread.** The basket will come around again, so don't load up on rolls before you pass it along. DO NOT butter your bread! Take some butter and put it on your plate. Butter your bread by bite, using the butter on your plate.

**Work from the outside in.** No matter how many forks you see, just start on the outside with the first course and continue to work your way in. If you get confused, look to your host or your neighbor. Fake it if you have to, just don't freak out! Once a utensil is used, it should never touch the table again. Lay used utensils on plates only. Remember not to meet a

spoon head-on, sip from the side of the spoon and don't put your spoon all the way into your mouth.

**Eating with your fingers.** There are times it is acceptable to eat with your fingers. Examples are artichokes, bacon, sandwiches, cookies, small fruits, French fries, hamburgers, corn on the cob, pickles, etc. When in doubt, use a utensil!

**Passing stuff.** Ask for things to be passed to you. Only pass to someone if you are the closest person to the item. Pick up the item and place it directly next to your neighbor, do not pass hand-to-hand. If someone request salt or pepper- pass both! The salt and pepper are married and cannot be separated! Once someone has requested an item, pass it to them, allow them to use it and then ask for it back if you need it. DO NOT stop and use something someone else is waiting for – they asked first. With family style meals – always pass food in the same direction. When passing pitchers or cups, turn the handle toward the person you are passing it to.

**Don't Reach.** You don't want to get in the way of people either eating or talking. Not only is it as impolite as standing in front of a TV with other people behind you, but also there is always the possibility of upsetting glasses or running your sleeve through someone's mashed potatoes. If you have to stretch excessively or rise

from your seat to reach something, politely wait until you can ask to have it passed to you.

**Don't blow on your food!** Even if it is hot, just give it time to cool. It is not appropriate to blow on your food in a large group.

**Don't speak with your mouth full of food.** Sure, you've heard your mother say it a hundred times, but no one likes to see a ball of masticated meat in your mouth. If you feel you must speak immediately, if you have only a relatively small bite, tuck it into your cheek with your tongue and speak briefly.

**Chew quietly, and try not to slurp.** Making noises is not only unappetizing, and distracting, but it can also interrupt the flow of conversation.

**Keep bites small.** In order to facilitate the above rules it is smart to keep bite sizes to a moderate forkful. Cut meat and salad so that it doesn't hang from your mouth after you shovel it in. Don't cut all of your meat at one time, this tends to remind people of feeding small children - and the messiness associated with this activity, it is appropriate to cut two-three bites at a time.

**Eat at a leisurely pace.** This rule, besides being good for the digestion, also shows your host that you want to enjoy the food and the company. Eating quickly and running is a sign of

disrespect for the host, as it shows that your focus is on the food and that you would rather be at home watching the grass grow than passing time with your host.

**Don't wave utensils in the air,** especially knives or if there is food on them. Besides the danger of knocking over glasses, piercing waiters or launching a pea into the eye of your date, this is a sign of over-excitedness that may be unappealing to those present. Earnestness is to be commended, but irrational exuberance goes beyond the limits of good table manners.

**Keep your elbows off the table.** You have also heard this one from your mother, but in close dining situations it is a vital rule. Elbows take up table space and can be a danger in knocking plates or glasses. Elbows on the table give you something to lean on and tend to lull you into slouching. If you must lean on the table a good tactic is to take a roll or piece of bread into your free hand and rest part of your forearm on the table.

**Wipe your mouth before drinking.** Ever notice that disgusting smudge on the edge of your wine glass? This can be avoided by first wiping your lips with your napkin. Blot at your lips delicately with your napkin; do not wipe your mouth like you are washing your face!

**Don't forget please and thank you.** These are handy words in most situations but especially vital at the table where common courtesies are noticed by everyone present. The wait staff is there to serve you, and they deserve your appreciation, as does your host.

**Excuse yourself when leaving the table.** You don't want people to think that you are tired of their company. If you must leave the table make your excuses somewhat obvious and appear to be pressing. You want to leave people with the impression that you would rather remain at the table talking with them than doing anything else, but the matter at hand is so pressing that it must be attended to at once.

## Time's UP

**Complement the Cook.** Even if the food is perfectly awful say something nice. You don't have to lie, simply find the positive side of the burnt leg of lamb... "Gee, the sauce was sure tasty." It is always pleasant to end a meal on a positive note.

**Don't pick your teeth.** If you cannot inconspicuously remove something from your teeth with your tongue, excuse yourself from the table and use a toothpick. Do not pick your teeth with a fork or at the table!

Denny, 2003

**Don't push your plate back.** Leave your plate where it is until the staff or host removes it. Do not push your dishes around on the table.

**Place your napkin on the table.** Once everyone is finished with their meal, you may place your napkin back on the table. Lay it on the right side of your plate (not in your plate), loosely folded (not wadded).

## "Embarassing Moments"



Did you burp? Did you spill something? To handle these little unfortunate incidents, just be classy! If you should burp, hiccup, cough, just excuse yourself quietly and put your napkin to your lips. If you spill something, just be calm. Try to stop it from spilling over on to someone else, by using your napkin and get a waiter to help you clean it up. If it spills onto someone else- let them clean it up and politely offer to pay the dry cleaning bill. The trick to etiquette is keeping your cool and using your head for clear thinking!

## References

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