

BRAIN BUILDING TIPS for Mealtime



MEALTIME PREP

WAITING TIMES

LANGUAGE

TABLE TALK

MATH

SCIENCE

BRAIN BUILDING TIPS

for Mealtime

MEALTIME PREP



Make mealtimes meaningful and engaging. You can help children grow their language and communication skills, math and science concepts, and important life skills, too! Try these fun, brain-building tips with children in your care.



WATER WORKS



TIP

9-24 MONTHS

Hand-washing time? Tell your child, "This is the HOT water (point to the faucet); this is the COLD water. Together they make warm water! This is the soap. Soap and water make BUBBLES that clean our hands. Now, let's rinse off the bubbles. Can you help me dry my hands with this towel?"

Brainy Background™

You're helping your child learn a routine that will keep them healthy and sharing the science of how things work (hot and cold make warm). If they're just learning to use words, you can prepare them for what's about to happen, by using a word they love, like, "We're going to wash our hands—BUBBLES."

READY, SET COUNT!



TIP

4-5 YEARS

Turn setting the table into a learning game. As you and your child count out plates and silverware for dinner tonight, ask them, "How many plates would we need if a friend comes to eat with us?" Or "How many plates will we need if someone isn't home to eat?"

Brainy Background™

When you ask your child to adjust their thinking and counting to fit a different situation, you help them learn to relate one piece of information to another. This helps them learn to reason and think in creative and flexible ways. And they're learning math too.

NAPKIN FOLDS



TIP

3-5 YEARS

When you set the table for a meal, encourage your child to think of different ways to fold napkins or paper towels to make different shapes and sizes. You might say, "What shapes can you make?" "What does this shape look like?" "What would happen if you kept folding the corners down?"

Brainy Background™

Your child is thinking about a familiar thing—a napkin—in new ways as they fold. Having a back-and-forth conversation about what they're doing promotes curiosity. It also helps them connect shapes and what they look like. The conversation helps develop creativity and critical thinking, all skills they'll need later in life.

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WAITING TIMES



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Tip

6-18
MONTHS

BACK AND FORTH BEATS



Does your child clap their hands or bang objects on top of the table at mealtime? When they clap or tap, copy their rhythm. Then add on to it. What do they do? Have a back and forth “conversation” with the beats.

Brainy Background™

When you go back and forth with beats, you’re helping your child begin to understand how to communicate with others. You’re also supporting their life skills such as memory, focus, and self-control.

Tip

3-5
YEARS

SPOT THE COLOR



Ask your child, “What color is your shirt today (or pants or dress)?” Then ask, “What other things are that color?” Add your ideas, too, and make it a back and forth game. See how many things you can think of.

Brainy Background™

Playing the “Spot the Color” doesn’t just teach your child colors. You’re also giving them the chance to practice focusing on an idea and a task with another person. The ability to focus is very important in life and in school.

Tip

3-5
YEARS

GUESS THE MEAL



Instead of telling your child what’s for breakfast, give them clues. Instead of eggs, say, “We’re having something that comes in a white shell, laid by a chicken. You can scramble them.” Take turns giving each other clues for foods as they learn the game.

Brainy Background™

The challenge of a guessing game exercises your child’s brain. You’re giving them the joy and fun of thinking about what they know, helping them gain confidence as a problem-solver, and building their vocabulary too.

BRAIN BUILDING TIPS for Mealtime

LANGUAGE



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0-18
MONTHS

TIP

MEALTIME MEMORIES



When feeding your child, use that time to tell them a story. You can make one up or share something that happened when you were a child. When they respond to your voice and make a sound, repeat the same sound back to them.

Brainy Background™

Your voice is your child's favorite sound. Even though they can't say words yet, they're listening and learning that sounds go together in words. This is an important foundation for language later on.

18-36
MONTHS

TIP

TEXTURE TALK



Use objects to explore the sense of touch. Ask your child, "Is this avocado rough and bumpy? What about this banana? Is it smooth?" Find other things for them to touch, like a cracker or bread, and ask if they're bumpy or smooth.

Brainy Background™

Children learn from their senses. When you give children experiences exploring how things feel, you help them organize and put words to their experiences. If you let them explore and come to conclusions, you help them learn like a scientist.

3-5
YEARS

TIP

RHYME TIME



Pick a word and take turns saying words that rhyme with it. Keep going until you run out of words that rhyme. Then let your child pick a word. See if you can come up with silly ones to keep it fun like "slinky, pinkie, stinky."

Brainy Background™

Rhyming games, like this one, help your child focus on word sounds. This will help with reading and writing later on.

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2-3
YEARS

Tip

PICK THE CUP



As you both have something to drink, take turns talking about how your cups are the same and different. Is one bigger? Smaller? What colors are they? What is in your cups? Is the liquid warm or cold?

Brainy Background™

Exploring a cup might sound silly, but when you explore and talk about the everyday things that are around you in a back-and-forth way, you're fueling the curiosity your child will need to be a lifelong learner. For them, the ordinary is extraordinary.

3-5
YEARS

Tip

FIVE FAVES



Tonight at dinner, talk about favorites. "What is your favorite color (animal, food, place, book)?" You start and then let your child have a turn. Keep going back and forth until you each name five favorites!

Brainy Background™

When you talk about favorites, you're helping your child learn about a category of things—things they like. See if you can notice similarities in what they like ("you like adventures"). You're helping them learn to make connections in their thinking.

3-5
YEARS

Tip

MEALTIME CHECK-IN



When eating together, invite your child to think about their day by asking, "What was the best part of your day?" Have each person at the table answer. Then ask, "What was the worst part of your day?" Go around the table again. Share your day with them and encourage them to ask others.

Brainy Background™

When your child hears about your day, they begin to learn how to understand another person's point of view. This is an important skill for life. They're also practicing the back-and-forth of conversation and thinking about their own day. This builds family connections and makes mealtime fun.

BRAIN BUILDING TIPS for Mealtime

MATH



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TIP

2-5
YEARS

GLASS
HALF FULL



When your child drinks out of a glass, have a back and forth conversation about how full the glass is. Is it a little full? Half full?

Brainy Background™

When you have a back and forth conversation about how full the glass is, you're helping your child gain basic ideas about math. It can also help them learn new words!

TIP

2¹/₂-4
YEARS

HOW
MANY



When you're serving food with pieces (apples, crackers), put three pieces on your child's plate and count out loud together: "one, two, three." Then ask, "If I took one away, how many are left?" You can count "one, two" together. Keep adding and taking away the three pieces for as long as they enjoy this game.

Brainy Background™

Even very young children can see the difference between one, two, and three pieces of something. You can build on this number sense by showing what happens when you add or take away pieces. This is the beginning of an understanding of math!

TIP

3¹/₂-5
YEARS

BITE SIZE



Use mealtime to talk about what's on your plates. After you've cut up both your child's food and yours, take a bite and count how many pieces you have left. Have them then take a bite and count what's left. Take turns back and forth until you're full!

Brainy Background™

Back and forth conversations about what you're doing spark new connections in your child's growing brain. Counting the pieces on your plate as you eat them helps them learn about counting while having fun.

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BEFORE AND AFTER



TIP

2 1/2-3
YEARS

Chat with your child about how foods change as you cook them. You could show them how a pancake or tortilla goes from doughy to solid. Or how pasta or rice becomes soft. Let them use all their senses and touch them before and after (once cooled.) Talk together about what you see!

Brainy Background™

Exploring how food changes means thinking about the food in two ways: before and after. Holding two things in your mind like this and comparing them is a great brain-building skill. Scientists call this working memory.

PIECE-BY-PIECE



TIP

2-3
YEARS

Offer your child a whole fruit or vegetable, like an apple. Ask questions about what the apple looks like, feels like, and smells like before cutting it. After you cut it, talk about what you both notice. What does it look like, smell like, and feel like now? Does it always taste the same?

Brainy Background™

It takes flexible thinking to understand two things can look different but still be the same, like how an apple can be whole or sliced and is still an apple. This ability is important for learning and creativity. Talking back and forth is the best way to develop their language skills too!

MINI CHEF



TIP

3-5
YEARS

Have your child help with safe and simple tasks while you are cooking. Mixing or adding an ingredient can be good places to start. As you work, ask them what they think will happen when they stir things together or add something new. Listen to their ideas, then talk together about what you see happening.

Brainy Background™

This is real-life science. Guessing about what might happen promotes your child's curiosity. This helps them adopt a lifelong love of learning!



Visit **GrowYoungBrains.org** for more information on brain building resources for child care programs.

