

10 ** excerpt from *Large Family Mothering* Amy Maryon DINING ROOM

This room is simple. It contains the place where your family comes together and will share a meal. What does it look like to you? Is your table even accessible? Are there stacks of papers and books that have accumulated on the table? Bags, purses, and coats sitting on the chairs where you left them while returning home for errands? In our home this table is used for everything. I do my work on it, the children do school, the boys play toys, the girls play play-dough, and we eat on it each day. I have to make sure that when the children and myself are finished, that we pick up our items and put them away so that the table can be clear and free from distraction while we are eating.

If your table is worn and you aren't fond of the top of it, pick up a cute tablecloth at the store. You can get seasonal ones quite inexpensively, but add a nice change of decoration in this room. I'd skip the cloth kind, especially if it is used frequently. Get a vinyl one that wipes off easily.

Make sure your chairs, benches, and table legs are added to your chore system to be wiped off a few times per year. After each meal, take your broom and sweep up under and around your table to remove any food that may have made its way to the floor. It takes only a few moments, but will make a difference in combating the mess in our homes. If you don't have time, give a small hand broom to a child to do this task. They might not get it all, but they can learn and hopefully most of it will get swept up.

Skip the paper products and save yourself money by purchasing cloth napkins. Choose ones that have patterns and can hide food stains better. Skip the light colored or white ones as they will stain. Look at discount stores for these and keep an amount that will allow you to use them for meals and get them washed to restock your drawer. You can also make some with material quite inexpensively. For a fancier table, learn how to do simple folds with them. This is a good activity for your children to research and help "set the table." Do an internet search on "how to fan fold napkins." They will liven up a place setting.

If you have any other furniture in this room, go through it and keep it organized. Choose simple wall decorations. Ones that are easy to wipe down and keep clean.

What to buy and what to keep for this room?

A table that is sufficient for your size family. If you are going to purchase new, think heavy duty so that it lasts a long time. Consider if you get a "fancier" one that looks perfectly shined for right now but when you have children they might end up dragging something across it and scratching it. Think durable. An all glass table is not going to be good when the toddler throws something on it to break it. Or keeps running into the corners and hitting his head. Think about if you can add a hook on high chair as well. If you don't have a lot of space, a hook on high chair is a nice alternative to a larger high chair that takes up much room. All these things to consider when looking. If you are just starting out, you can probably find one used from a local ad listing place. Many people upgrade or move and have to get rid of what they own. Same goes for if you are looking to upgrade your table. You might be able to find one where someone is moving and can't take it with them.

If you find one that is less than ideal consider if you are able to paint or refinish it. It only takes a little bit of time to sand down and apply some new stain and clear coat to a scratched surface. Consider painting the

bottom of your chairs a separate color than the top for a cleaner line. We did our chair bottoms black and kept the top natural colored wood.

Skip the rug under the table, as it will become a catch all for food and stains.

Place settings will be something you have to clean up around, opt for a nice centerpiece. Consider using different wreaths laid down with a large candle in the center. Look for these at your local thrift store. The internet is full of tons of DIY centerpieces, do some looking, and get creative for cheap.

This room is going to be the room that you are going to need the “least” amount of items before setting up a home.

Meal time manners

Meal times should be a time of peace and not chaos. We have had to work many times over the years to train our children in the “fine art of table manners.” This is a time that we consistently help them work at being able to sit at a table for a long period of time and be considerate of those around them. I have a lot of little ones and it gets loud. Sometimes too loud to want to even eat. They are constantly all wanting to talk and interrupt each other, so it is a daily reminder to wait their turn. Things we work towards achieving at each meal:

1. The loudness factor. Lowering our voices while talking and waiting our turns as to not interrupt.
2. Chewing with their mouths closed and not talking with food in their mouths.
3. Not asking for more unless all of their food is eaten on their plate.
4. Not getting up and getting their own food, asking first.
5. Taking drinks while eating—they could go a whole meal and not drink.
6. Asking the host, if they may be excused before leaving the table.

Before they leave, they have to scrape any remainder of food, into the scrap bucket and take their dishes to the sink. We help the younger ones with this task, but everyone can learn how to do this. The older ones stick around to help clean up everything.

Now that the second group of children are getting older, we like to work at having conversations around the table. Something that maybe everyone does already but in our home, it is more of eat and keep moving. When the older set was younger we did conversational starters. On my blog, you can download and print them off to use. You place them in a jar and during meal time, reach in and grab a “starter” and everyone gets a chance to respond.

As a family, we have gone through our starters many times and now we have new questions to ask each other. You can copy these or download them from www.plainandnotsoplain.com. Cut them into strips, fold them up, and place in a decorative container near your table. Let someone choose a ‘starter’ to get the conversation going for dinner.

If you were free to do anything you wanted to all day what would you do?

What was your favorite thing you did this summer? Why was it your favorite?

Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were younger?

If you could change one thing about your family what would it be?

Name three activities that make you happy.

What is your favorite and least favorite food?

What is one fun thing you hope to do in the next year?

If you had three wishes, what would they be? (You can't wish for more wishes!)

Do you know how your name was chosen, or how your parents name was chosen?

What special talents do you have?

Name a special talent about someone else at the table.

What is your earliest memory?

What would your perfect day be like? Where would you go and what would you do?

Where is your favorite place to have quiet time?

Tell one truth and one lie about yourself. See if we can guess which one is true and what is a lie.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

What is your favorite type of weather?

If you could choose a vacation destination, where would it be?

What is your favorite season?

What is something that you can do for someone else this week?

What will you miss most about winter?

What traits about your mom and dad would you like to have when you are grown up?

Tell me a favorite memory from our family.

What is your favorite tradition for Christmas?

What is your favorite tradition for Thanksgiving?

What are some things that you can do for a person who isn't feeling well. Name three things.

What are two things that you are thankful for?

What is one thing that you did today that helped other people?

Name alphabet gratitude. Being with letter A and say each letter an item you are grateful for. Example:
Apples, bananas, Collin, Dad, etc.

Share something that someone did nice for you this week?

If you had superpowers what would they be and how would you use them to help others?

What is your favorite thing to do outside?

What is your favorite thing to do inside?

What food could you eat everyday for the rest of your life?

If you could eliminate one chore for the rest of your life, what would it be?

If money were not object, what would you ask for your birthday?

What meal would you like to make for our family all by yourself?

What is the best and worst part of your day today?

If you could be trapped in a TV show for a year, which one would it be?

If you were stranded on an island, what three things would you want to have?

Older children questions---we keep these separate for ages 10 and up.

Why do we celebrate the 4th of July? What is your favorite part of the holiday?

Do you think we have too much freedom, or not enough?

Share a person you admire and tell us why you do. Famous or not.

If you could change one thing about your family, what would it be?

What is one skill or thing that you want to change or improve of yourself this next year?

Do you find it easy to say "I love you"?

What is your favorite thing to do in the world and why? How would you feel if you couldn't do it anymore?

Is there someone you know who is having a hard time right now? What might you do to help them know you understand or want to understand how they are feeling?

"Don't judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes" What does this phrase mean?

Do you prefer to read or hear?

Do you prefer to listen or speak?

What does "open-minded" mean? Do you know someone who is "open-minded"?

Is it important to show compassion to other people, even if they may not show compassion back?

What makes a good friend?

Tell us one truth and one lie about you. See if we can guess which one it is.

If a friend asks you to keep a secret that you don't feel comfortable keeping, what would you do?

Is it always good to be loyal? When might it not be?

What three words would you use to describe our family?

Think about someone our family knows that could use a helping hand. Who is it and what can we do to help?

What is one act of kindness that you have done for someone in the last few weeks?

If someone gives you a present and you do not like or want it, what are some ways to respond?

What is your best personality trait?

Would you rather work in a group or by yourself?

What does it mean to be inspired?

When you do something nice for someone else, how does it make you feel?

What is your greatest talent?

Teddy Roosevelt said, "Do what you can, with what you have where you are." What does this mean to you?

What will life be like when you, the child are the age of your parents?

What do you daydream about?

Where do you think you will want to live when you grow up?

What fear would you like to overcome?

If you never had to work for money, what would you want to do as an adult?

If you could invent a machine to do something in your life, what would that machine do?

If you could stay up all night, what would you do?

If you had the chance to leave Earth, would you? What are some things you would miss the most?

Imagine you are in the woods by yourself for a whole day. Where would you sleep and what would you eat?

What are some things you could ask other people to do for you. What would happen if they stopped doing those things?

During what part of your day do you feel most anxious and rushed? How could we change that?

Where do you feel most relaxed?

What is the most beautiful place you have ever seen?

What is the hardest thing about being ___years old?

What is the best thing about being ___years old?

Would you rather be rich or famous?

What is your favorite form of exercise?

What is your favorite outdoor activity?

What do you love most about being a part of this family