

About.com Children With Special Needs

Ten Tips for Dining Out With a Child With Special Needs

By Terri Mauro, About.com Guide

Dining out as a family can be a lot of fun -- or it can be a horrifying disaster, if your child's special needs can't be accommodated in a way that helps you keep the peace. With a little preparation and these simple tricks, you can give your mealtime outing the greatest chance at success. You'll also be able to cut and run when you need to.

1. Pick places where your child will be welcome.

Dining out is going to be hard enough. Don't add the burden of taking your child someplace where perfect behavior will be a necessity. Save the tony joints for a rare night out with friends or your spouse. There are enough loud kid-friendly restaurants around most neighborhoods to give you adequate choice and your child a little wiggle-room.

2. Be a regular.

Children with special needs often thrive on routine, so going to a familiar place may buy you better behavior and less agonizing over what to order. Then, too, if the staff gets to know you, your family may receive more personalized service and more generous understanding. If you find a place that's particularly accommodating, reward them with repeat business. Tipping generously wouldn't hurt, either.

3. Do some advance research.

If you're not sure a restaurant will have something that fits your child's dietary needs or finicky tastes, see if you can find a menu online. Many chain restaurants have Web sites that give nutritional information and other previews of what your mealtime choices will be. If the restaurant you're eyeing has no such online presence, call and speak to a manager, or stop by on your own to preview the menu.

4. Dine at off-times.

Frankly, if you're taking your child out for dinner at 8 p.m. on a Friday or Saturday night, you deserve the nightmare of long wait-times, cramped dining rooms, and slow service that you're sure to get. Hit the restaurant early in the evening, and/or on weeknights, for a more leisurely, low-stress dining experience -- and fewer disapproving fellow diners.

5. Ask for a booth.

Child-containment is easier in a booth than at a table. Put your child between an adult body and the wall, or between two adult bodies. If you've brought a [big bag of tricks](#)¹ to provide distractions, you should be able to minimize the "standing on seat peering over the partition at other tables" action. Pack some hand sanitizer, too, so you don't have to stress too severely if your child crawls under the table.

6. Hide the condiments.

If the table has bottles of salt and pepper and sugar and ketchup and what-all sitting conveniently in the center of the table where you child just *will not stop playing with it*, move it. Put it out of your child's reach, put it on a nearby empty table, or ask the server to take it away. Even bland food is more tolerable than spending an entire meal saying *put that down!* and scooping up spilled spices.

7. Request extra napkins.

The napkins the restaurant sets out will probably quickly make their way to the floor, or get messed up by the time the salad course is cleared. Request extra napkins when you order so that you're ready when your child has a face-full of chili or hands full of spaghetti sauce. He who hesitates gets covered with it, you know.

8. Ask for the bill right away.

One of the most dangerous moments of restaurant dining comes when your child is needing to get out of there *NOW!* and you still have to get the waiter's attention, get the check, get the change, and leave the tip. Even if the staff is prompt with your requests, that tense time of waiting can make the difference between a successful outing and an unsuccessful one. Request the check when the food comes, pay while you're eating, and be ready for a quick getaway.

9. Ask for to-go containers, too.

Most restaurants can bring you containers to fill at the table instead of whisking your order to the kitchen for backstage packing. Have the to-go boxes at your table right from the get-go so that if your child reaches that crisis moment before you're done eating, you can scoop up your leftovers, take off, and finish the meal at home.

10. Use dessert as a reward.

Give your child a sweet treat for making it through a meal -- but think seriously about getting it somewhere other than the restaurant. Staying for the dessert course may tax your child's restaurant tolerance to the breaking point, and makes it difficult to settle the bill early on. An ice cream cone on the way home or a stop at a drive-by donut shop gives the same reward without the risk. Treat yourself, too. You survived!

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