

DISH OF THE DAY

Family dining teaches children social skills that cannot be underestimated, and at La Fontaine, to paraphrase William Horman, table manners maketh 'man', says **Sebastien Chapleau**...

If you call La Fontaine Academy between 12–1pm, you'll be greeted by an automated message telling you that the school office is closed. That's because office staff, along with all our teachers and teaching assistants, are in the hall, eating with our children.

In that hour our hall becomes a family hall. It gets rather noisy. However, as a team of teachers, it's a noise of which we're proud. If you pay attention, what you'll hear is children talking to each other in a very civil and courteous way. You'll hear adults and children chatting about non-academic topics such as their favourite games, sharing jokes and, generally, building great relationships that aren't just class-based. You'll see our administrative staff eating with our children, connecting to what

school life really is about: our children's education.

At La Fontaine Academy, a great emphasis is placed on the notion of family dining. This is part of our character education and is used as a way to develop soft skills amongst our children; skills such as table manners,

conversation, patience, and curiosity. In practice, family dining is very straightforward: > We have round tables so we can eat facing each other. Eight people per table – seven children, one adult.

> Plates and cutlery are placed on the tables, which children set themselves – "Pass the plates, around, please. I'll pass the forks and knives."

> Food and water is provided for each table of children to serve out themselves (with a bit of support from helping adults for the younger ones).

> There is only one food option, so everyone gets to try new things. (Unless someone has specific dietary requirements – e.g. medical, religious, cultural – everyone is served the same meal.) Being 'fussy', as we clearly tell parents / carers when they come to our open days, isn't a dietary requirement. > We take our time: we take at least half an hour. If someone finishes early, he stays at the

table and has a chat with his friends.

This is a rather traditional way of looking at how children ought to eat, but a way which we strongly believe will help our pupils in the future. The reason for this is twofold:

1 Many children's eating habits are unhealthy. Not only because of the content of what they often eat, but also because of the way they eat, i.e. too quickly!

2 Many children, sadly, as they grow up, don't develop those crucial social skills which, in later life, have a considerable impact on their economic prospects. Many young adults find it difficult to interact in social contexts where eating formally is the norm.

More and more schools in inner-city contexts are adopting family dining as part of their focus on developing successful life habits in their young people. Oasis South Bank Academy, for instance, has developed a 'Table Manners' policy, demonstrating that such an aspect of their students' education had to be thought through very carefully. Leaving things to chance, I would argue, simply will not

do. Reach Academy Feltham, similarly, places family dining at the heart of its practices in order to support children to grow in terms of their social confidence.

Many might argue that such things aren't part of what teachers should have to do. We're not lunchtime supervisors, after all. At La Fontaine Academy, we believe the opposite. We believe that it is part of our mission to go the extra mile and support children with any aspects that relate to their academic and emotional wellbeing. Family dining is just one example of what it means to go beyond what's expected.

Our new reception cohort, on their first day at school in September, were greeted with a plate of sausages and cabbage. Many of our children had never tried cabbage and, lo and behold, they all tried it and ate it! Some dishes have been more difficult than others, but with passionate adults at every table encouraging you to try something new, things are made much simpler than you might imagine. And when you receive emails and letters from parents / carers telling you that things are much easier at home, you know that you've done something right.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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