

Table Topics

To add spice to your family's next meal, try serving up a basketful of tantalizing questions

BY KAREN TELLEEN-LAWTON

DURING THE DAY, my family tears around town, racing between schools, jobs, and activities. The only time we can find to settle down together is at the dinner table, where we finally get to share the stories, excitements, and frustrations of our various adventures. Unfortunately, dinner often falls at a gingerly balanced moment between a hectic day

and a long evening of homework, so for a long time our meals were not as fulfilling as I had wished — until I remembered my Toastmaster days. Some years back, I had participated in a Toastmasters International public speaking workshop, in which I and other novices practiced speaking extemporaneously. We drew topics from a wicker basket set on a conference table, then took a deep breath and expounded on the subject as best we could, in front of sympathetic club members. The Toastmasters call this exercise Table Topics. I decided to modify it for our dinner table.

I inaugurated Table Topics one evening, after a series of dinners had ended in a dismal assortment of bickering, complaints about the (delicious!) food, and bodies hunched uncommunicatively over plates. I placed a large, decorative basket, the one we fill with candy for trick-or-treaters, in the center of the table. Inside were six folded slips of paper. I waited until curiosity

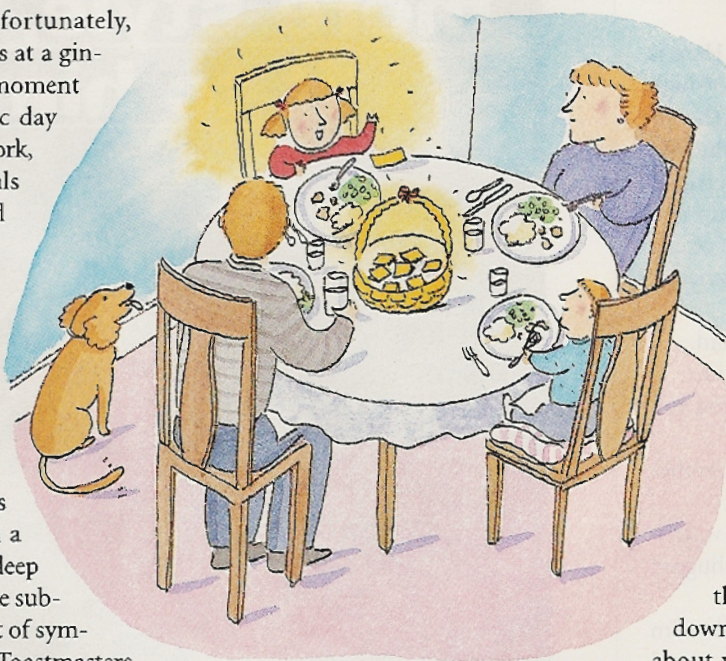
overcame our seven-year-old daughter, Emily, who demanded to know what the secret papers were.

"On each one is a question or a topic to discuss," I explained. "If you'd like to, you can pick first. You can either answer the question or talk about something of your

promptly reached for the next slip of paper. It inquired about a good book he had read lately. He told us, in charming detail, why his favorite book was *I Like You* by Sandol Warburg (Houghton Mifflin). My husband, David, had to talk about something embarrassing that had happened to him, and we all winced with him when he told us about chastising a worker for not handing in a report, only to have it turn up in a pile on his desk.

That first Table Topics session was revealing. I discovered that despite my long-standing practice of encouraging my kids to talk about their days, it was not until they were assigned a topic that they reveled in the undivided attention. When answering a question, they were special, and the slips of paper established who had the floor. It took no prodding to adopt Table Topics as a mealtime tradition. To keep things running smoothly, we laid down two rules: we may choose to talk about whatever we wish, rather than the question drawn; and we allow the speaker uninterrupted time (within reason), until she or he requests comments. Our subjects have ranged far and wide: What is the worst/best thing you have ever eaten? What is something you would like to be doing in ten years? What is your earliest memory? If you could be an animal, which one would you be?

Now, five years later, we continue to spin stories at the dinner table, though we no



choice." A game! Nothing could have turned around the conversation faster. Emily and her six-year-old brother, Tim, scrutinized the slips as though they held the clues to a mystery. Emily then chose one and carefully read it aloud.

Her assignment was to "Discuss something fun you have done in the last few days." Emily recalled a game she and her friends had made up at recess, and she related it with such exuberance that Tim

longer play Table Topics every night. As the children have grown older, I have slipped in topics for which we must draw on current events and our opinions on local and international issues. We have learned interesting facts about the kids' school subjects and laughed long and loud at our foibles. Best of all, our practice of regular communication has made it easier for us to share disappointments and difficulties that otherwise might have been masked beneath tantrums or silence. We have discovered a lot about each other.

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