

Chatter Box Dinner Time

**A Tool to Help Engage Families in the Art of Conversation at
Dinner Time**

Pilot Case Study Evaluation & Feedback

“Family Dinner Time & Connection”

Conducted between January – August 2020

Author

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Overview – About the Evaluation and its Timing

During 2019 we were becoming increasingly aware of research being conducted on the importance of dinner time and family dynamics, and an increasing awareness of the impact electronic devices were having on dinner time conversations and family engagement. This coincided with research which had been conducted on the importance of children knowing and understanding their family history, its impact on their resilience, and a child's sense of place in their family. This body of research highlighted the importance of story telling around family building moments such as dinner time, family get togethers, family holidays and outings.

Immediately we saw the need for a tool to help stimulate Family Engagement and Storytelling at the dinner table that was fun, entertaining, and educational, free of devices or electronic distractions. The tool had to be readily available, easy to use, practical for dinner time dynamics, and readily accessible for busy parents or inquisitive children.

It was important to establish and understand the following key themes:

1. Was there a need for a Family Dinner Time tool to prompt conversations?
2. Who was the likely instigator of the need for a tool, and introducing it to the family?
3. What was the Families reaction to the tool?
4. What was the family reaction to the structure, questions, and format of the tool?
5. When was the tool used, who participated and how often did it get used?
6. Was it practical, and useful in prompting conversations around dinner time?
7. What was the subsequent impact on the family?
8. Where did the family collect the Chatter Box Dinner Time Tool from?
 - a. Retail Food Shop: Butcher, Fruit & Vegetable Store, Supermarket
 - b. Personal Wellness: Hairdresser, Barber, Beautician
 - c. Restaurant & Food Outlet: Family Restaurant, Takeaway Food
 - d. Education: Upper Primary School
 - e. Direct: Via My Word Online promotions, and requests

Prior to commencing our Pilot and Evaluation process, we conducted some market research in October and November of 2019 to gain feedback from parents with young families and their dinnertime dynamics. Through this feedback we were able to gain some insights into favourite meals, when families do sit down together and eat, length of time dinner takes, any family meal time rules, and whether there was interest in a tool to help prompt dinner time family conversations.

Our initial market research feedback helped to inform and prepare our pilot and evaluation process. Little did we foresee the issue of COVID-19, and how the Chatter Box Dinner Time Tool would play in helping support and connect families (face to face and virtually) during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

BACKGROUND

The Issue:

Today's parents are the first generation that needs to deal with the issue of limiting electronic device time with their children.

Research undertaken across the World has highlighted the potential harmful effects of excessive screen time on young children including:

- Emotional and Mental health (anxiety & depression)
- Obesity and physical wellbeing
- Emotional Intelligence, and an ability to read non verbal communication cues
- Language and listening skills, and the ability to engage in conversations

Concurrently research has also highlighted the importance of family dinnertime on family dynamics, and the resilience of a child. Importantly dinnertime has been singled out as one of the most important ways of building family history and family connection. The research highlighted, that if a child knows their family history, they are more likely to have:

- More resilience
- A heightened sense of self identity and place
- Reduced anxiety levels
- Higher levels of self-esteem
- Fewer emotional problems

The research outlines that it is not so much if a child knows their family history, but how they learn about it. The family dinner table and the dining dynamic is one of the most important ways of connecting families and learning family history.

However, the family dinner dynamic is changing with up to 7 out of 10 families stating they do not sit down for dinner together most nights. There are a host of reasons for this including busy family schedules with both parents juggling work and family duties. When families do sit down to dinner the research states:

- 95% of people agree conversations improves a meal dynamic
- 92% stated devices and screens stop them from conversing
- 80% said they often sit in silence at mealtimes due to the use of devices & screens
- 100% would welcome tools to help stimulate family conversations
- 97% of Families prefer meals where families laugh, connect, tell stories & share food
- 83% rated dinner time as an important way for families to connect

CHATTER BOX DINNER TIME TOOL FEEDBACK

Overview:

In February of this year (2020) we began a pilot of our Chatter Box tool to help connect families on a deeper and more meaningful basis. We believe that Dinner Time should be Family time and is an ideal time for Families to come together to connect, and talk about their World, discuss issues, make plans, solve problems, and share feelings. Our Dinner Time Tool is a direct response to recent research that highlighted:

1. The impact too much screen time and devices were having on family dynamics
2. The importance of Family Dinner Time on family dynamics

Our Response

Being a story sharing business, we understand the power and importance of storytelling, and the effectiveness to pass on history and wisdom. By understanding the issue and the need, we went about designing and curating a dinner time tool to help stimulate family conversations, that would be fun, easy, practical and widely used, and at the same time an educational / learning tool.

Step 1: Conduct some market research on Family Dinner Time Dynamics (Sept – Oct 2019)

Step 2: Design a dinner time tool (November 2019 – January 2020)

Step 3: Was a pilot and evaluation process (February – September 2020)

Step 4: Will be to develop a series of tools for families to use during dinner time and other family building activities (Get togethers with the extended family, road trips, holidays)

The Impact of COVID:

No one could have foreseen the impact COVID, so we fast tracked the development of a Chatter Box Dinner Time sheet that families could use as a tool to help stimulate dinner time conversations in a fun and engaging way. As a response, we fast tracked the development and circulation of our Dinner Time Sheets (x 12) and extended our evaluation period until the end of September. What was going to be an initial pilot until the end of June on just one tool, has been extended out to September and the development of 12 Chatter Box Dinner Time Story Sheets.

Our Initial Market Research: (Sept – October 2019)

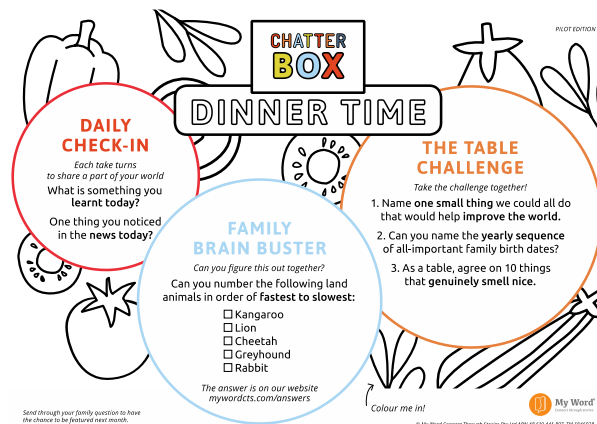
- Common family dinnertime rules were: None / No devices or TV / Table Manners / Clean Up together
- Common Topics discussed at dinnertime: School / Family / Upcoming events / what happened in the day / weekend plans
- Tools – Methods used to make dinner time more interesting or engaging to spark conversations: asking questions about the day / give everyone a chance to talk / make sure no screen time or devices at table / choose a random topic
- Average length of dinner time: 20-45 minutes
- Go to Family Dinner: Spaghetti / Taco's or Wraps / Roast

- Greatest Challenge to regularly sitting down: Not at home at the same time / family schedule do not align / everyone just too busy / no point as teenage children often just give one-word answers or grunts / members distracted by devices or TV

Chatter Box Dinnertime Tool Design:

We curated a Family Dinnertime tool to help families connect and talk. The experience is broken into three parts, aiming to last over a 20-30-minute period

1. **Daily Check In** (Questions and Prompts to check in and share each other's day)
2. **The Table Challenge** (Questions to prompt table wide discussions and engagement)
3. **Family Brain Buster** (Fun Quiz where everyone will be able to visualise and have a conversation or view on, whilst fuelling general knowledge and education)



A small initial “control” group to test the question structure was conducted in January, and based on the feedback, we then curated and developed the 12 pilot sheets and sample.

The idea was families could take and use a free sample with their family, and if keen, they could purchase (for a nominal fee) and download 12 Dinner Time Chatter Box Sheets. Families were directed to our website to share their feedback and experiences with the Chatter Box Dinner Time tool

Methodology: What was done & how

Between February and September a free promotional Family Dinner Time Chatter Box tool was publicly displayed and promoted through a range of willing local supermarkets, butchers, family restaurant, takeaway food outlets, fruit shops and hairdressers (anywhere where parents would be shopping, thinking or talking about dinner time).

The dinner time tool was also promoted via a series of schools, including the Community Language Schools of Australia, to gain student and teacher insights.

The idea was to gain an insight into how families, retail outlets, children and schools react to the Chatter Box Tool, and whether families see the tool as being a useful, fun, and engaging addition to dinner time. It was important for it to be considered family friendly – not a task or school exercise.



Feedback Sources:

The feedback came from a variety of sources including:

- National Coverage from around Australia
- Mothers and Fathers of school aged children
- Several Grandparents
- A small yet significant number of children (between the ages of 10 and 15)
- A selection of primary school teachers
- The Proprietors or Owners of Outlets we promoted the Chatter Box Tool Through



Importance of Dinner Time Ground Rules:

We suggested that Families make their own rules, but we suggested three

1. Make someone the host of the meal to help steer conversation, prompt all to speak and make sure everyone has equal time.
2. The meal should be free of devices, phones, and TV screens
3. Take your time, and let the conversations guide the family dynamic and time

Our initial research highlighted that families typically spend between 20 to 40 minutes together over dinner, so we thought it important for families to set their own ground rules and not be overly prescriptive.

Feedback:

Frequently Given Feedback Themes (FGF)	Stats & Facts We Learnt & Received
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Good tool to use when all family together and helps extend dinner time ➤ Great to connect virtual mealtimes with extended family members (especially grandparents) ➤ The tool took the participants to places they would not normally talk about ➤ Great way to help stimulate conversations and family dynamics ➤ It did act as a catalyst to get everyone off devices or watching TV at dinner time ➤ During COVID lock down family were running out of things to talk about – the tool helped revitalise dinner time and gave us new things to talk about ➤ Parents learnt new things about their children’s lives and how they observe the world ➤ Once they started, the children were keen to try the activities ➤ It was good way to practice active listening and conversation skills ➤ When three generations were included, it was interesting to see the different stories from the same question ➤ It helped stimulate thinking and sharing forgotten memories ➤ The Chatter Box tool allowed families to go somewhere unexpected ➤ It helped stimulate a shared understanding of family history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 50% of Families regularly eat together as one Family ➤ 83% think dinner time is an important way to connect as a Family ➤ Some Dinner Time Rules that were the most important to enforce include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No IT devices at the table ○ TV turned off ○ All sitting together and eating at the same time ○ Everyone takes turns to speak ➤ Some Dinner time Frustrations or pet peeves include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ People using devices at the table ○ No one engaged or talking – just silence ○ One-word answers from children ○ The same conversations, especially during COVID lockdowns – nothing new to talk about ➤ Average time usually taken to eat dinner is 20 minutes – this was extended when using the Chatter Box Tool ➤ 100% discussed COVID and how as a Family they will get through it ➤ Retail outlets, hospitality and takeaway food & delivery services have said they would be happy to further promote and adapt a Chatter Box tool into their business offering ➤ Educators have expressed interest in developing Chatter Box as a tool to help build aural and oral skills, particularly in the upper primary levels ➤ Suitable retailers have indicated a need for a fun and simple tool to help families connect, and get people off devices at dinner time ➤ The Table Challenge and Family Brain-buster sparked good discussion and table engagement

A Sample of Some of the Direct Feedback Quotes We Received:

1. *"It's a great idea to get the family talking on a deeper level – more so than just on what is everyone doing tomorrow"*
2. *"It helped learn more about each other's lives and experiences – which in-turn allows you to connect on a more meaningful basis"*
3. *"Chatter Box is a different family activity – we have all the Board Games and regularly play them – but this activity is quite different and unique – thank you"*
4. *"It helped stimulate family stories that may not otherwise come up"*
5. *"It allowed people to share their thoughts in a safe environment – it is a good conversation starter"*
6. *"Chatter Box Tool is proof you do not need to make things complicated – it was an easy way to engage the family and share stories in a fun way"*
7. *"It was a good family bonding experience – amazing how just telling stories can be so interesting and revealing"*
8. *"It was a great way to stimulate the mind"*
9. *"I was amazed that it brought out bits of the mind and memories that were long forgotten"*
10. *"I spoke with a customer and she said it helped really make a difference and change the dinner time dynamics – got everyone off devices"*
11. *"Whoever designed the questions is a genius – so simple – but my kids started reluctantly – now they are the ones hosting Chatter Box conversations at dinner"*
12. *"We were eating dinner in silence during lockdown – nothing new to talk about – that all changed when we started using the Chatter Box Dinner Time Tool"*
13. *"Mealtime conversations were usually one-word responses to questions and grunts now they won't shut up – even the quiet ones"*
14. *"There is a newfound interest in having dinner together and conversing and talking about whatever. You never know where the conversation will go"*
15. *"Dinner used to be a quick 20-minute break for my kids to eat and dash back to their devices and online community. Now since using Chatter Box we take some time over dinner and talk, sometimes lasting for up to an hour"*
16. *"My kids are practicing their verbal and listening skills – and don't even know it – love it"*

Next Steps:

Our Designers and Story Masters are now developing a series of Chatter Box Tools and products that we will be bringing to market over the next 18 months. These include

- Christmas & Family Mealtime Placemat (launching for Christmas 2020)
- A Dinnertime Card Deck (2021)
- Road Trip Card Deck (2021)
- Family Vacation Card Deck (2022)
- Food & Hospitality Chatter Box Offering (TBC)
- Digital Versions and applications (TBC)

Participating Groups (A Big Thank You)

- **My Word** Online Community (Digital download & use)
- **IGA Stringers** Supermarket & Café – Sorrento (Point of sale display at checkouts)
- **Sorrento Meats** – Butcher (Point of sale display)
- **Sardo Restaurant** – Sorrento (Included in takeaway orders)
- **CLSA** - Community Language Schools Australia (Circulated to children and their families via school & staff)
- **Kuche Fine Foods** – Beaumaris and Gardenvale (Included in take-home meal orders)
- **IGA Supermarket – Beaumaris** (Community noticeboard)
- **Hampton Fruit & Meat Market** – Hampton (Point of sale display)
- **Hampton Barber** – Hampton (In store display)
- **La Svolta Pizza** – Hampton (In store display)
- **Body Sense Beauty Salon** – Black Rock (In store display)
- All the willing Participants who completed the survey and provided feedback

Also our broad-church control group who willingly participated in the initial concept scope and provided feedback. In all, over 500 Chatter Box Dinner Time Tools have been circulated and used by Families between February and September of 2020.

Finally:

We have been delighted and somewhat overwhelmed with the response and feedback we have received from our Chatter Box Tool, especially with the unexpected and challenging COVID Pandemic. Never has it been more important to come together and connect as a family. We are proud to play our small part in helping families connect on a deeper and more meaningful way. We thought we would share our feedback

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