NEWS LESSON

Would a Phone-Free Dinner Bring Families Closer?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Do shared meals still do the social work they used to do?
2. Where should responsibility for children's screen use sit?
3. Can an institution create a good conversation, or only make room for one?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**ombudsman**	☐	A	an official who protects the public's rights and looks into complaints
2	**magistrate**	☐	B	an organisation made up of smaller groups
3	**juvenile**	☐	C	doctors who specialise in children's health
4	**federation**	☐	D	connected with young people
5	**paediatricians**	☐	E	greater than is reasonable
6	**initiative**	☐	F	completely focused on something
7	**excessive**	☐	G	a judge who deals with less serious cases
8	**absorbed**	☐	H	a new plan aimed at solving a problem

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A group of Sardinian restaurants is trying to bring conversation back to family meals. But when does a helpful nudge become an unwelcome rule?

1 There is a particular kind of silence that can settle over a restaurant table before the food arrives. Nobody is upset. Nobody has necessarily run out of things to say. They are simply elsewhere: checking a message, watching a video or giving a child a screen to make the wait easier. In Sardinia, fifteen restaurants have volunteered to see what happens when that familiar option is removed.

2 The one-month pilot, called “At the table without screens”, asks parents and children eating at participating establishments to put their devices away. In exchange, families receive a “reunion kit” of games and drawings, designed with the Italian federation of paediatricians to encourage conversation. The activities have time limits so they can sit comfortably within a lunch or dinner, rather than turning the whole meal into an organised event.

3 Anna Cau, the island's children's ombudsman and a former juvenile magistrate, is leading the initiative with support from a local hospitality association. Her argument is that this should not be treated as a task for parents alone: the broader environment can help create the conditions for children to interact with others. Emanuele Frongia, who represents the association in Sardinia, says restaurants increasingly see lively chatter replaced by diners absorbed in their devices.

4 It is an appealing idea, partly because it addresses a problem many people recognise without requiring an elaborate solution. A shared meal can be one of the few times a family stops moving in different directions. A game might ease the awkwardness of beginning a conversation, especially if asking about school or work tends to produce a one-word answer. The restaurant provides both the opportunity and a reason to take it.

5 It is also part of something larger. Cau frames the pilot as one step in a campaign against excessive screen use among children, and Frongia says the plan is to extend it to other restaurants, voluntarily, if the month goes well.

6 The case for phones is less romantic, but it is practical. A parent may be expecting an important call. A child may struggle with a long, noisy wait. A family might be talking to someone who cannot join them in person. And a silence at the table is not automatically a failure: people can enjoy each other's company without filling every minute with words.

7 The trial also raises a question about choice. Restaurants already set rules about reservations, menus and behaviour, so a screen-free table is not an entirely new kind of condition. Even so, some customers may welcome a reason to put their phones away while others resent being told how to spend time with their own families. That the restaurants volunteered does not mean every diner will feel the same way.

8 The scheme was announced before the pilot began, so nothing is yet known about whether it improves anything. Its value lies in the experiment itself. For an hour, a device that usually solves boredom is out of reach. What replaces it, whether a game, an argument, a conversation or comfortable silence, will depend on the people at the table.

Sources: The Guardian, Sardinian restaurants ban families from using phones at the table. Picture: .

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The scheme could reach more restaurants only if the first month goes well, and only by choice. T F NG
2. The writer sees a screen-free table as unlike anything restaurants normally ask of customers. T F NG
3. The writer suggests the pilot is worthwhile whatever its results turn out to be. T F NG
4. The games in the reunion kit were tested on children before the pilot began. T F NG
5. Cau holds that parents alone should be responsible for children's screen use. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

ease	elaborate	elsewhere	extend	frames	resent	undermine	withdraw

1. The ceremony was far more _____ than the couple had wanted, with three orchestras and a fireworks display.
2. A few well-chosen questions can _____ the tension between people meeting for the first time.
3. He began to _____ his sister for being praised at every family gathering.
4. The council hopes to _____ the scheme to a further twenty schools if the results are encouraging.
5. Her body was in the meeting, but her mind was clearly _____ .
6. A good teacher _____ every mistake as a chance to learn.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The _____ of the trial will be hard to measure, since nobody collected data beforehand. (EFFECTIVE)
2. Some diners may find any rule _____ , however well meant. (INTRUDE)
3. The organisers' _____ is to make families talk, not to punish anyone. (INTEND)
4. The pilot is not _____ , because restaurants chose to take part. (COMPEL)
5. Few would deny the _____ of a family sitting down together. (SIGNIFICANT)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. In a phrasal verb the particle often carries the meaning, and some are fixed with a preposition: run out of, settle over, lie in.

apart	away	in	into	on	out	through

1. Even close friends can run _____ of things to say, and the silence need not be awkward.
2. The idea may not catch _____ with teenagers, who are used to eating with a screen.
3. The value of the pilot will lie _____ what families learn about themselves.
4. Guests were asked to put their phones _____ without being made to feel watched.
5. A trial that goes well may turn _____ a permanent fixture.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. The organisers cannot measure what a phone-free hour achieves. Does that matter?
2. Would you rather a public space encouraged better behaviour, or left you alone?
3. If this pilot spread, which other places should try it, and which should not?

9 Role-play: a phone-free table

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the restaurant manager

Your restaurant has joined the phone-free trial. A family has just sat down. Explain the rule and the reunion kit. Answer the parent's worries and decide if there can be any exceptions.

Student B · the parent

You are eating out with two children and you are expecting an important message. You don't like being told what to do. Ask questions, explain your problem and try to agree a solution.

Useful phrases

Could I just explain how it works?

I'm expecting an important message.

It's only for one meal, and we've got games for the children.

I'd rather decide that for myself.

What if there's an emergency?

Let's agree on a compromise.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you reach an agreement, and was the rule fair?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 A · 2 G · 3 D · 4 B · 5 C · 6 H · 7 E · 8 F

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 elaborate · 2 ease · 3 resent · 4 extend · 5 elsewhere · 6 frames

6 Word forms

1 effectiveness · 2 intrusive · 3 intention · 4 compulsory · 5 significance

7 Language focus

1 out · 2 on · 3 in · 4 away · 5 into

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