

Family Times

NEWSLETTER



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Family Mealtime

Children today face overwhelming challenges. As groups study how to help children navigate life's challenges, one answer is emerging: Make time for family meals. One of the strengths of emotionally healthy families is spending time together. These families often eat meals together.

Eating meals as a family strengthens family bonds by supporting good communication, creating family traditions, and modeling positive character and social skills. It also increases nutritional intake for the whole family and may reduce childhood obesity.

Mealtime's Link to Literacy

A Connecticut Healthy Community task force found that the single factor common to the best readers from elementary through high school was that their families ate dinner together at home. The number of days per week that adolescents ate meals with their families was a powerful predictor of whether they were "adjusted" – less likely to take drugs, less likely to be depressed, more likely to be motivated at school,

and likely to have better peer relationships. Children who ate an average of five meals each week with their families were better adjusted than those who ate an average of three meals. The family meal may be one of the simplest and most effective solutions to a variety of youths' problems.

Quality mealtime conversation increases children's mental and verbal abilities. Mealtime is a natural environment for children to practice talking and speaking.

Children whose families eat meals together at the table develop larger vocabularies at earlier ages. They are better able to talk at an earlier age, and they score two to three grade levels higher on reading and language tests. Children whose families talk the most use more words.

Benefits of Family Meals

Family-style meals provide time together. It is a time to send the message to the people you love that they matter and that you're listening to what they have to say because you care about them. Time together is very important for children and adults to talk and build connections. Better communication is one of the key benefits of family-style meals.

During mealtime, children can practice:

- sharing, taking turns, and other social skills
- listening and communicating
- using manners
- choosing healthful foods

- fine motor skills (pouring, scooping, and serving)
- setting the table
- meal preparation and cleanup
- learning family values and creating a sense of community

Children and adults who eat family meals together:

- eat more fruits and vegetables, whole-grains, and calcium-rich foods
- eat less high-fat, high-sugar foods
- learn to regulate portion size according to hunger and fullness
- try new and different foods
- foster healthy attitudes toward food

Make Family Meals Happen

Family-style meals are for more than eating; they're for talking, sharing, listening, learning, and supporting. The service style can vary, but the goal should be a pleasant atmosphere for time together.

- Start together and end together to create a sense of community.
- Be a positive role model for your children – eat YOUR fruits and vegetables.

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To Make a Difference

- Plan ahead for family meals.
- Create a positive atmosphere.
- Start together and end together.
- Model table manners.
- Relax, enjoy the meal, and talk.

- Turn off the television to strengthen conversation and improve nutritional intake.
- Talk pleasantly with everyone, even young children.
- Ask questions that require more than one-word answers.
- Make a special atmosphere with music, flowers, etc.
- Everyone should be finished before anyone leaves the table.
- Decide when you will eat together – breakfast, lunch, or dinner.
- Don't answer the phone.
- Eat at the table facing each other.
- Practice manners at the table.
- Take your time and enjoy the food and fellowship!

Family mealtime is not the time for discipline, lectures, arguments, criticism, or sulking. Talk should be light, happy, and upbeat. Adults need to set the tone for the children. Show them that mealtime is meant to be pleasant. If conversation starts moving in a tense direction, change the subject and address the matter later.

Make It Easy and Healthy

Healthy family meals can be easy and save money. They help prevent infectious diseases, postpone chronic disease, and support a healthy immune system. Plan ahead every week to anticipate work, school, and activities that affect mealtime. Be flexible about the time. Maybe breakfast is the one time everyone can eat together. Get creative about where you eat together.

Consider these helpful hints:

- Plan a weekly menu and shopping list to save trips to the store.
- Cook once, eat twice. Make a double batch and freeze extra for a busy day.

- Pack simple "picnics" for ball practice and games (sandwiches, carrots, apples, milk).
- Fresh, frozen, and canned fruits and vegetables are simple, quick, and healthy.
- Plan leftovers. Cook extra chicken to use in a casserole, soup, salad, or sandwich.
- Post five quick favorite family meals on the refrigerator and keep the ingredients on hand.
- Healthy convenience foods save time. Pick up a roasted chicken; add a bagged salad, sliced peaches, whole-grain bread, and milk. Dinner is served!
- Analyze your kitchen and identify the obstacles that slow you down.
- Share shopping, preparation, and cleanup chores.

Combine Cooking and Family Time

Beware of the "whining hour" before dinner when everyone is hungry and cranky! Getting everyone involved can help. Spend time with children and get dinner on the table at the same time. It's a great opportunity to catch up, and they learn to be comfortable in the kitchen. Choose tasks that match their ability and that make your job easier, such as washing vegetables, wrapping potatoes, measuring ingredients, shredding lettuce, or setting the table. Relax and let them do it their way. The added bonus – children are more likely to eat foods they help prepare.



The Book Nook

Good food books to share with your child:

Gregory the Terrible Eater
by Mitchell Sharmat

Green Eggs and Ham
by Dr. Seuss

If You Give a Mouse a Cookie
by Laura Numeroff

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