

Making Family Mealtime Fun and Easy

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Research has shown that eating dinner or another meal together is an effective way to reduce the risk of substance abuse and to raise healthier children.

Why is the family mealtime important?

Family mealtimes are slowly becoming a thing of the past. With today's hectic schedules, more and more families are neglecting a very important component of family togetherness. This program topic will give pointers on ways to make mealtimes simple and fun for the entire family.



This is what the research says about why family mealtimes are important.

- When you eat with your children, it is more likely that they will eat healthier and more balanced meals.
- Compared with teens who have frequent family dinners, those who rarely have family dinners are three-and-a-half times more likely to have abused prescription drugs or an illegal drug other than marijuana.
- Girls who have five or more meals a week with their families are one-third less likely to develop unhealthy eating habits, which can range from skipping meals to full-fledged anorexia or abuse of diet pills.
- Parental influence and involvement are important tools in preventing substance abuse. Regularly sitting down for a meal with your children is one way to connect with them and be involved with what is happening in their lives.

It is 5 p.m. and soccer practice starts in an hour. Do you have time for a sit-down dinner with the family? If you opt for something simple

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such as soup, sandwich, and a piece of fruit, you do. A slow-cooker is a wonderful way to have soup ready for dinner. The ingredients can be put in the cooker in the morning and cook all day. All you need to do is whip up some peanut butter and jelly or grilled cheese sandwiches and you have a family meal. Use the slow-cooker for other meals also; find some recipes and put that slow-cooker to good use.

Maybe breakfast is a little more relaxed than dinnertime. You can sit down with the family at breakfast and talk about the plans for the day. Having a simple breakfast can reduce preparation time and give you more time to sit together.

Involving children in meal planning and preparation can get them interested in sharing the meal as a family. Even small children as young as 3 can help wash vegetables, set the table, or do other small chores for dinner. There are books available from the library on involving children in meal preparation. Parents may check the Food and Nutrition Information Center's (FNIC) Web site (www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/resource_lists.shtml) for resources, including lists of cookbooks suitable for children.

How can we make mealtime fun?

First, get rid of distractions. Turn off the TV and unplug the phone if at all possible. The fewer the interruptions at the table, the better the quality of the conversation can be. Don't let pre-teens or teens bring any books, hand-held games, or cell phones to the dinner table.

Need some suggestions for making mealtime fun? Try having a theme for one meal each month. One example is a picnic theme. Serve sandwiches, fruit, potato or macaroni salad, and fresh vegetables. If the weather is nice, take it outside in the yard. Small children will be excited to have a "picnic." Let your children come up with their own themes and have fun planning the meal.

Conversation-starters are always fun at mealtime.

Some conversation-starters for young children might be:

- If you could be any type of animal, what would it be and why?
- If you could have a super power, would you rather fly or be invisible? Why?
- If your family could have any animal in the world as a pet, what would you like to have? Why?

Some conversation-starters for school-age children might be:

- What is the most interesting news you read, heard, or saw today? Why?
- Who did you sit beside at lunch or on the bus today?
- What makes you different from the person sitting next to you at the table? What makes you the same?

Some conversation-starters for teens:

- Describe something you are planning to do in the future (in the near future or years ahead).
- Tell a joke that you think will make other family members laugh.
- Describe one of our family traditions you really like and one new tradition that you would like us to add.

Try to keep mealtimes simple so you can enjoy them too, get children involved to creating fun meals, and sit down as a family as often as possible.

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