

Family Mealtime

Make it Happen

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Do you ever wish you had more time to talk, laugh and have fun with your family? There is a simple solution – the family meal. You have to feed your family. Why not find a time that all of you can sit down for a family meal? It is a perfect time to talk.



At times you may have to pack a “picnic” dinner so that you can keep your family mealtime.

Eating four to five meals together each week helps children develop social skills, strengthens family bonds, and promotes good communication. It also gives children a sense of security and lets them know that their family is there for them. Family mealtime is an activity we cannot ignore and the effects it can have on children cannot be overlooked. Having regular family meals is a challenge to many but the following suggestions should make it easier to make family mealtime a reality.

Make family mealtime a priority.

- Set a regular time for family meals. Eating together every night of the week might not be possible.
- Enjoy more table time and less cooking time.
- Keep table time realistic—not too long so that mealtime becomes a chore.

Just do it. Every journey begins with a first step.

- Begin by having at least one or two meals a week. This could be Saturday lunch or dinner or Sunday brunch.

- Be creative about where you will eat together. Family mealtime does not always have to be in your home. At times you may have to pack a “picnic” dinner so that you can keep your family mealtime when you are on the go. One of the secrets to keeping family mealtime is being flexible.
- Plan ahead every week to anticipate work, school, and other activities that affect mealtime.

Meal planning

- Plan simple, quick meals, especially if you are starting out.
- Use cookbooks and grocery ads to write menus.
- Read recipes from start to finish and make a shopping list of items needed.
- Stock up on basic items such as meat, beans, rice, pasta, canned vegetables, and fruits.
- Use what you have in your cupboard or your refrigerator to come up with meal suggestions.
- Consider leftovers when planning meals.

Meal preparation and cooking

- Cook several meals when you have more time, perhaps on weekends, and store them in the refrigerator. Even if you cannot prepare the entire meal in advance, completing the main dish helps. You can just add a vegetable dish and a salad if you have the main dish prepared.
- Use a slow cooker. An entire meal can be prepared before leaving for work and be ready when you come home for dinner.
- Do some tasks ahead of time
 - Wash and trim vegetables
 - Cook noodles for a pasta salad
 - Cook lean ground meat for tacos or spaghetti sauce the day before and store it in the refrigerator.

Get family members involved

- Have children set the table.
- Have an older child pour the milk.
- Allow younger children to put ice in glasses.
- Have family members cut up fruit and vegetables for a pre-meal snack.
- Ask family members to make the salad.
- Have individuals take turns or share the task of cleaning up.

Avoid disruptions

- Take telephone calls after dinner. Use an answering machine or turn off the ringer on the phone.

- Turn off the television. The goal of family mealtime is to enjoy each other's company and to communicate with each other. The television robs the family of the time to talk and connect.

Dinner Conversation

Make dinner conversation enjoyable by focusing on the pleasure of being with each other. Focus on positive rather than the negative. Here are some points for dinner conversation.

- Ask everyone to share about their day. Encourage everyone to take the time to listen and ask questions of the person who is sharing.
- Parents can use this opportunity to tell about family traditions and childhood memories.
- Ask kids about their school work and assignments.
- Tell a joke.
- Plan or talk about a family vacation you would like to take.
- If you were given \$500 that must be spent on someone outside of the family, who would you spend it on and what would you buy?
- Take the opportunity when everyone is at the table to decide on tasks for the next day's meal, or upcoming activities and events.

Dinner Riddles and Trivia

- What is the strangest food you have ever eaten?
- Can you think of any songs about food? Sing one!
- What is your favorite food? Why do you like it?

- Can you name a vegetable that is a root? A flower? A stem? A leaf?

Resources

School Wellness. <http://www.school-wellness.org/AtHome.aspx>.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010. <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2010/DietaryGuidelines2010.pdf>.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. ChooseMyPlate. <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>.

Wellness In the Rockies. Family mealtime. http://www.uwyo.edu/WINTHEROCKIES_EDUR/FamilyMealtimes.asp.

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