

Family Meals: The Benefits of Eating Together



Many families struggle with finding the time for everyone to sit down together to eat a meal. Life events such as after school activities, parents working different shifts or long hours, and teenagers wanting to hang out with their friends after school can make it difficult to make time to eat a meal together as a family. However, even if your family is only able to eat one meal together during the week, it can still make a difference in your child's life.

There are many benefits to having meals together as a family. It can be a time for you to really get to know what your child is involved in. It can also be a time to connect and build strong relationships. Having meals together as a family can also make a difference in your child's life by:

- Lowering their chance of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use¹
- Helping them to develop healthy eating habits²
- Reducing their chance of developing eating disorders²
- Increasing their self-esteem²
- Improving school performance³
- Keeping the lines of communication open between parents and children
- Keeping parents informed about their child's daily activities

How do I make family mealtime a priority?

With today's busy lifestyles, it can be difficult to find the time to have a meal together as a family. But with a little effort and planning, it is possible.

- Schedule some time during the week where everyone is free to eat breakfast, lunch or dinner together as a family.
- Let everyone suggest a meal or dish. Try to keep it nutritional.
- Ask family members to help prepare the meal. Oftentimes children will enjoy family meal time if they are involved in meal preparation.
- You can assign duties. For example, one family member can shop for the ingredients, another can set the table, another can make the salad, etc.
- You may also want to assign clean up duties.
- Keep it simple and fun.

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What should we talk about at the dinner table?

The time you spend with your family at the dinner table can be a great opportunity to create memories and talk about what's going on in each other's lives. Here are a few topics you could bring up to make family mealtime meaningful.

- Discuss a family trip or activity that you all want to do and schedule it on the calendar.
- Go around the table and have everyone share their best and worst parts of their day.
- Ask your child about school assignments, classes, teachers and upcoming projects.
- Use it as a time for family members to bring up a problem they may need help solving.
- Ask fun questions. For example, if you could be any super hero, who would it be and why?

Spending time together can be a strong source of love and encouragement. The time you spend in conversation and staying involved in each other's lives can be very valuable. Try scheduling time on your family's calendar this month and see the differences it can make.

References:

1. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University [CASA]. (2007). *The importance of family dinners IV*. Retrieved February 23, 2009 from <http://www.casacolumbia.org/absolutenm/articlefiles/380-Importance%20of%20Family%20Dinners%20IV.pdf>.
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3. McKenzie, John. (2005). *Family dinner linked to better grades for teens*. Retrieved February 23, 2009 from <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Health/story?id=1123055&page=1>

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