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FAMILY MEALTIME:

Much more than just a meal!

Introduction

What is a family meal? A "family meal" is when the people you live with come together to eat and talk. It can include everyone or just you and your child. Family meals don't have to be fancy, and they can be eaten at home or away. Meals are best when you talk and listen to each other with no distracting electronic devices.

Do family meals make a difference?

Family meals are a simple way to build healthy relationships and promote health. Coming together as a family to share meals is associated with many benefits. Here are four:

Connection: Children and adults thrive on human connection. Eating meals together provides a great opportunity to connect with family and friends. Children — even teenagers! — thrive on having a mealtime routine they can count on. To make the most of the opportunity, turn off televisions, cellphones and other distractions. Gather at a table or somewhere you can focus on one another.

Emotional well-being: Families who eat together have children who are less likely to be depressed and less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as smoking, drugs, and drinking alcohol. Family meals are also associated with a reduced risk for eating disorders.

Academic success: At meals, children practice important social skills, such as taking turns and engaging others in conversation. Children increase their vocabulary and learn how to express ideas at family meals. These benefits help explain why children who eat family meals more frequently are found to do better in school.

Healthier eating habits and weight: Meals planned and prepared for family meals are generally more nutritious than meals eaten alone or on the run. Family meals also provide an opportunity for parents to model good eating habits and attitudes about food. Family meals are associated with healthier weights in children and adults.

No matter how you serve them...

Make time for family meals.

How can families succeed at having meals together?

Make family meals a priority – Parents and children make time for what is important to them. Prioritize family meals over other activities as often as possible. Schedule them on the family calendar, even if only once a week. Recognize that eating is an essential activity. Do it together rather than apart.

Plan for family meals – Look at your schedule and determine the days and times that eating together is possible. Decide what you will prepare; make sure you have what you need on hand. A weekly menu plan prevents last-minute worries about what to cook. Shopping for the week saves time and money — and reduces stress. Use time-saving strategies, such as doubling a recipe and freezing half for a future meal.

Share preparation tasks – Involve everyone in age-appropriate tasks, including meal planning, finding recipes, grocery shopping, cooking, setting the table, and cleanup. Young children can do a variety of kitchen tasks. Older children can plan and prepare meals. Parents get valuable help and children learn lifelong skills.

Make meals enjoyable – Create an atmosphere where everyone feels relaxed and valued. Engage everyone in conversation. Use conversation starters to get people talking. Avoid battles over food – parents provide and children decide how much to eat of what is offered. See “Helpful Links” for more information.

Tips for families of preschoolers

- Establish mealtime routines that prevent “hangry” young children. Include well-spaced meals and snacks. Provide sensible “appetizers,” such as raw veggies, while waiting for a meal. Prompt children with a signal, such as a 2-minute countdown, to put away toys, turn off devices, wash hands, and come eat.
- Involve young children in one or more meal-related tasks: picking out produce at the grocery store, pouring and stirring ingredients, dishing their own food, clearing their plate.
- Help young children learn the art of conversation. Allow them to tell stories about their day. See *Helpful Links* for more ideas about conversation starters.

No matter how you serve them...

Family meals can make memories that last a lifetime.

Make a date with your family ... to eat and talk together!

Tips for families of school-age kids

- Create a meal planning calendar. Ask your children to search for recipes online, make a shopping list and carry out prep from start to finish for one or more meals each week.
- Meal preparation helps school-age children practice math skills, food science, and creativity.
- Establish boundaries during mealtime that prohibit or limit the use of electronic devices. Engage children in conversation. Show them you value their opinions and ideas.

Tips for families of teenagers

- Scheduling is tricky. Be creative. Commit to as many meals together as possible — and make them happen by planning ahead.
- Meal planning and preparation are valuable lifelong skills. As often as possible, let your teenager be in charge.
- Teens need family connection as much or more than ever, so maintain a “no electronic devices” rule at your family table. Set an example by following the rule yourself.

Helpful Links

For planning healthy meals and mealtime tips:

<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/families>

For ideas to cook as a family:

<https://www.eatgathergo.org>

To avoid mealtime battles:

<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/the-division-of-responsibility-in-feeding/>

For conversation starters:

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation/>