

Benefits of Family Meals¹

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Introduction

When was the last time you and your family sat down to a good dinner? Recently there has been a shift in society's view of eating family meals together (Condrasky 2006; Hamilton and Wilson 2009). Families today have busy schedules. Kids are involved in extracurricular activities, and many mothers are more active in the workplace. Although most families would say that family meals are valuable, they often allow other things to become a priority, devaluing the act of eating family meals together. Making time for family meals is beneficial to the entire family.



Figure 1. Busy schedules may keep many families from eating regular meals together, but they will benefit from coming together and sharing meals regularly.

Credit: Maria Teijeiro

One way to make sure your family sits down for family meals is to ask your children to help with dinner preparation and make it a fun experience. Some fun programs you can explore are Cook It Up, and Cooking with Kids (<https://cookingwithkids.org>). All of these can give you some good ideas about how to bond with your children as you prepare family meals. These programs highlight the importance of family meals and the benefits of creating the meal as a family (Thonney and Bisogni 2006; Thomas and Irwin 2011; Walters and Stacey 2009; McIntosh, et al. 2010).

Helpful Information

Why are family meals important?

Over the past 30 years obesity among children has increased. Many schools and community programs are encouraging healthy eating choices and habits among youth. One way to help youth make healthy food choices is by creating healthy eating choices and habits at home, starting with family meals. When parents value family dinners, children are likely to view family dinners as important. Family meals can provide important examples to show children what foods are good to eat and how much of the good foods they should eat (Lanigan and Power 2008).

Benefits of Family Meals for Youth

Eating family meals together benefits children in several ways.

- Increased focus on homework and reading for pleasure (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and Bearinger 2004)
- Improved school performance (Hamilton and Wilson 2009)
- Greater development of language skills (Snow and Beals 2006)
- Increased and more sophisticated level of vocabulary (Snow and Beals 2006)
- Improved development of healthy eating patterns (Hamilton and Wilson 2009)
- Higher intake of several essential nutrients (Croll, Hannan, Neumark-Sztainer, Perry, and Story 2003)
- Decreased likelihood of having eating disorders (Ackard and Neumark-Sztainer 2001)
- Decreased likelihood of being overweight (Fulkerson, Kubik, Story, Lytle, and Arcan 2009)
- Less likely to develop depressive symptoms (Fulkerson, et al. 2009)
- Less likely to be involved with cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use (Eisenberg, et al. 2004)

- Increased sense of family connectedness, communication, and functioning (Hamilton and Wilson 2009)
- Increased likelihood of resisting negative peer pressure (Fulkerson, et al. 2006)
- More likely to experience positive identity assets (Fulkerson, et al. 2006)
- Less likely to attempt suicide (Fulkerson, et al. 2006)
- Less likely to engage in sexual intercourse (Fulkerson, et al. 2006)

Overall Benefits for the Family

- Regular and consistent family time
- Reduction of anxiety and depression in children
- Increased feeling of togetherness, coherence, and solidarity
- Increased emotional and social bonding
- Shared nutrition
- Relaxing, talking, and laughing as a family unit

Things You Can Use

Each family can make meals a time of unique family bonding. A few common tips families can use to help each other enjoy family meals and create an atmosphere of warmth, unity, and respect are listed below.

1. Show interest in your family members by asking about their day.

Here is an example of how the beginning of this conversation may look:

Father: "Son, tell me something fun you did at school today."

Son: "Me and my friends built a castle at recess."

Mother: "That does sound like fun. Was it a big castle? Did you guys put guards and knights in front to protect the people who live in it?"

These kinds of conversations validate a child and show that they are loved and cared for.

2. Compliment each other and provide positive feedback, encouragement, and support when necessary.

This is important because everyone knows it feels good to have someone encourage us and notice our accomplishments. Whether congratulating a spouse on receiving a promotion, encouraging a daughter to apologize to her best friend because of an argument, or giving feedback to a son about his decision to play

soccer, family meals provide a unique context in which all kinds of conversations can take place.

3. Turn off (or silence) television, cell phones, laptops, radios, music players, and other electronic devices.

This is important because it helps get rid of any distractions and disruptions that can interfere with spending true quality (and quantity) time with family members (Hunt, Fazio, MacKenzie, and Moloney 2011). As a result, everyone can focus on each other and strengthening family relationships.

4. Do not interrupt or talk over one another.

This is important because talking over someone else can be seen as rude and insensitive. Also, not interrupting or talking over someone shows respect to family members and lets them know that others are paying attention to what they are saying.

5. Plan and prepare meals together.

This is important because everyone can help decide what meal will be prepared. This process can build decision-making and negotiation skills among family members. The skills of providing clear feedback and expectations about what kinds of family meals everyone likes and dislikes can also be developed.



Figure 2. Having your children help with meal planning and preparation can be a fun bonding activity.

Credit: Jupiterimages

There are many barriers that may prevent families from having family meals. Creating meal plans and allowing everyone to play a role can minimize these barriers (Abbot and Byrd-Bredbenner 2010). Table 1 provides a way to plan meals while Table 2 provides a schedule for meal preparation, including cooking, table setting, and cleanup. Table 3 provides a way to track current family meals and to schedule future family meals.

Conclusion

Eating family meals together typically results in positive benefits for family members. Benefits can include increases in educational, health, social, and behavioral skills. In addition, participating in family meals can increase positive family interactions and overall family well-being. Accessing programs designed to focus on mealtime and family and youth development can be critical to introducing families to the benefits of family meals.

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Tables

Table 1. Meal Planning for Week: _____ Directions: List the specific meal that your family will eat each day for the days and meals you eat together.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Breakfast							
Lunch							
Dinner							

Table 2. Family Meals Preparation Schedule for Week: _____ Directions: List the family member(s) in charge of assisting with each task for that day.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Cooking							
Table-Setting							
Cleaning Up							

Table 3. Family Meals Schedule for Week: _____ Directions: Mark off each day that your family plans to eat a meal together as well as days that you eat an unplanned meal together. Use different colors to mark the planned meals and the unplanned meals.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Breakfast							
Lunch							
Dinner							

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