

Say "YES" to family meals

Recipe for Family Mealtime

- 1 Start with one busy family**
- 2 Add a strong desire to share more time together**
- 3 Blend in creative ideas about when and where to eat**
- 4 Stir in compliments and pleasant conversation topics**
- 5 Sprinkle with good manners**
- 6 Add a dash of thanks**
- 7 Serve with a variety of simple, healthy foods**

Yield: One family with stronger communication skills and deeper feelings of connection.

Shared meals nourish mind, body, and soul

Families who have made the effort to schedule meals when most or all members can be present have experienced the following benefits:

■ *Better communication*

Mealtime conversations let family members share the daily happenings in their lives and get to know more about each other. Mealtime also can be an opportunity to plan family activities and discuss family needs.

■ *Stronger family bond*

Every family has strengths. Eating together increases each family member's sense of belonging and provides a setting for discussions that can reinforce values that are important to the family. Regular family meals create a routine that helps children feel more secure. Stronger bonds make it easier to deal with problems that arise.

■ *Shared learning*

Eating together offers an opportunity to practice social skills, including table manners and conversation, as well as basic food preparation skills.

■ *Improved nutrition*

A more balanced nutritious meal is likely to be prepared when most or all of the family eats together. Shared meals also can save money.

Tempt your family back to the table

■ *Make eating together a priority*

Yes, families are busy, but even busy families have to eat. The benefits of sharing meals and conversation outweigh scheduling difficulties.

■ *Be creative and flexible about when and where you eat*

Family meals can be shared at home, at a restaurant, in a park, or near the playing field. Simply eat with your children whenever possible, even if it isn't every day.

■ *Make mealtime pleasant*

Eliminate distractions by turning off the television and radio. Practice making positive comments, taking turns talking, and listening without interruption. Postpone negative conversations until another time.

If children ask why manners matter, remind them that good manners are a way of showing respect for others. Practicing at home builds confidence for social situations away from home.

■ *Serve a variety of foods*

Consider family preferences and MyPlate when planning meals. Try to include a variety of foods daily.

Many children need encouragement to try new foods. A small bite may be all they want the first time they taste something unfamiliar.

■ *Keep meals simple and easy*

Enjoying a simple meal together creates long-lasting memories. Consider using a crockery cooker for a soup- or stew-based meal that can be ready to eat when the family is. Look for recipes, like lasagna, that can be doubled; put the second pan in the freezer for a later meal.

■ *Involve everyone*

Giving each person a task for each meal helps family members learn how to put a meal together. It also lets them practice lifetime skills in teamwork and cooperation.

Common challenges and suggested solutions

CHALLENGE:

You really don't have the time or skills to cook meals.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

Think simple. A shared family meal doesn't have to be a roast turkey feast. A family meal can be take-out food, such as pizza, plus celery sticks, apples, and milk. The important thing is eating together and sharing conversation. For quick and easy ideas, read magazines or cookbooks or ask ISU Extension staff for suggestions on time-saving and low-cost menu ideas.

CHALLENGE:

Meal planning is difficult because family members don't like the same foods.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

Finding a menu that includes something for everyone can be difficult; it can be tempting to become a short order cook. Some families set aside one meal a month as buffet night and allow each person to make a desired item. Others let family members take turns preparing their favorite meals. Over time, adults and children will be hungry enough to eat. Continue offering a variety of healthy food choices.

CHALLENGE:

Family schedules are so busy there's no time to eat together.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

Children do better when they have a routine to their lives; and that includes mealtime. Explore ways individual schedules can be adjusted to allow mealtime together. Consider limiting the number of activities that family members participate in.

Children who often eat dinner with their families are more likely to

- Do well in school
- Be emotionally content
- Have positive peer relationships
 - Less likely to have friends who drink alcohol and use marijuana
- Have lower levels of stress and be bored less often
- Be at lower risk for thoughts of suicide
- Be at lower risk for substance abuse
 - 70% less risk for substance abuse
 - Half as likely to try cigarettes, be daily cigarette smokers, or try marijuana
 - One third less likely to try alcohol
 - Half as likely to get drunk monthly
- Have parents who take responsibility for teen drug use

(Based on a 2006 report from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University comparing teens and children who share family dinners at least five times per week to those who shared family meals twice or less per week.)

Check these resources

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Nutrition and Wellness
www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/child-nutrition-families

Other titles available from the Extension Online Store (store.extension.iastate.edu):

Food for ME TOO: Nutrition for the Toddler and Preschooler (PM 1257)
Guide to Healthy Kids: What Parents Can Do (NCR 374)
Healthy Hearts: How to Monitor Fat and Cholesterol (PM 1967)
Non-food Alternatives for School Rewards and Fundraising (PM 2039a)
Overweight Kids: What Communities Can Do (PM 1884)
Snacks for Healthy Kids (PM 1264)
Steps to a Healthier Family (PM 2005)
What Schools Can Do to Promote Healthy Eating (PM 2039)
What's for Lunch? It's In the Bag (PM 3026)

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