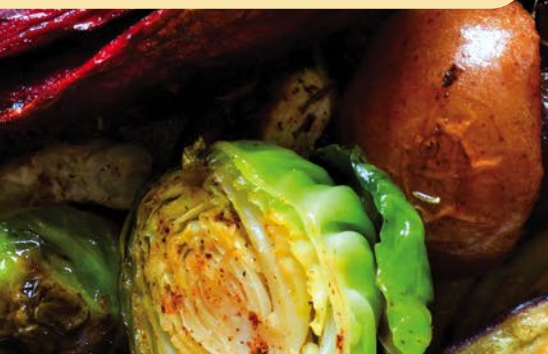




Recipe for a Mindful Family Mealtime

1. Start with one busy family.
2. Add a strong desire to share more time together.
3. Blend in creative ideas about when, where, and what to eat by involving family members in meal planning and preparation.
4. Stir in pleasant conversations. Have each family member share something from their day.
5. Sprinkle with good manners and add a dash of thanks to the cook.
6. Use all five of your senses (see, hear, smell, taste, and touch) to fully experience and enjoy your food. Describe its appearance. Does it make a sound when you chew?
7. Serve with a variety of simple, healthy foods.

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



Say “YES” to family meals.

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:

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. Get children involved with meal planning and preparation. They can help with planning menus, creating a grocery list, and grocery shopping. Helping in the kitchen will teach basic food preparation skills.

Better communication

Mealtime conversations allow families to share daily happenings and get to know more about each other. This time can also be spent planning activities and discussing family needs.

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 televisions and cell phones. Take a moment to practice mindful eating by using all five senses and taking time to slow down to enjoy each bite. Start conversations around the food. What stands out about the food? What does it feel like? Does it make any sounds? How would you describe the smell? Before you chew, what is the first thing you taste?

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. Aim to include as many food groups as possible during each meal. 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. Do not force them to eat a new food. Continue to offer the new food and let them decide when to try it.

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.

Create traditions.

Reserve a special dinner plate to rotate between family members to celebrate a birthday, good grade on a test, or any other special occasion. Assigning theme nights, such as Taco Tuesday, may be another way to get children excited for family mealtime.



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. The [Spend Smart. Eat Smart. website](https://spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu) (spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu) has quick, easy, and affordable recipes that can provide a nutritious meal for families.

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. Sit down as a family to schedule certain days on the calendar that family meals will be held. Post the calendar in the house and/or share on a mobile device. Consider limiting the number of activities that family members participate in.



Children who often eat dinner with their families are more likely to have the following:

- Lower levels of stress
- 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
- Parent(s) or guardians who are more engaged in their child's day-to-day life
 - Help establish standards of behavior
 - Set positive examples of healthy behavior
 - Much less likely to use drugs, drink, or smoke

Based on a report from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University (www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2012) comparing teens and children who share family dinners at least five times per week to those who share family meals twice or less per week.



Check these resources

- Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Nutrition and Wellness—www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/nutrition
- Spend Smart. Eat Smart.—spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu
- Extension 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)
 - Non-food Alternatives for School Rewards and Fundraising (PM 2039A)
 - Snacks for Healthy Kids (PM 1264)
 - What's for Lunch? It's In the Bag (PM 3026)

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