

Fun Family Mealtime

Family mealtime provides opportunities to talk laugh and have fun together. Many families do not take advantage of mealtimes because they are so busy working, running the kids around, involved in community activities, or dealing with conflicting schedules, that family mealtime is often put on hold. Families can find ways to make family mealtime possible by using make ahead meals and planning meals in advance. Ideas and fun activities for mealtime conversations are included in this publication.

Family mealtime is neither a thing of the past nor is it extinct. The Kitchen Report (2000) surveyed 930 meal planners throughout the nation and found that:

- The average American family eats dinner together five times a week.
- Thirty-eight percent of meal planners mentioned that they love to cook, 46 percent did not mind cooking, and 16 percent found cooking to be a chore.
- Two of three families eat dinner at the kitchen or dining room table. The average time spent at the dinner table was 30 minutes.

Rewards on your investment in family mealtime

- Children who have regular mealtime generally have better nutrition. That is, they eat more fruits and vegetables, eat fewer fried foods, and drink fewer sodas.
- When families eat meals together parents get some time to see that children develop healthy habits. These habits may continue when children become adults.
- Children who have regular family mealtimes are less likely to be overweight. It seems that when children have family meals they are more likely to get the nutrition they need and less of the “empty” calorie foods.
- Young people whose families eat meals together spend more time on homework and read more for pleasure.
- The more often families ate meals together the less likely it was for their children to smoke, use alcohol, and drugs. Children who eat meals regularly with their family did not think of suicide.
- Regular family mealtime can make it easier for children to read and write.
- When families have meals together there is a sense of unity. This is needed for children to feel safe and secure.

Nutrition for busy families

The Dietary Guidelines describe a **healthy diet** as one that:

- Emphasizes vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products;
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts; and
- Is low in saturated fats, trans-fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

Make family mealtime happen

Making family mealtime possible

- Set a regular family mealtime; pick a time together
- Enjoy more table time and less cooking time
- Keep table time realistic—not so long that the pleasure goes away

Plan ahead every week to anticipate work, school, and other activities that affect mealtime

- Plan simple, quick meals, especially to start
- Use cookbooks and grocery ads to write menus
- Make a shopping list
- Read recipes from start to finish
- Stock up on basic items
- Use what you have on hand
- Consider leftovers when planning meals

Meal preparation and cooking

- Cook several main dishes when you have more time — such as on weekends
- Make soups, stews, or casseroles to freeze for the next week
- Cook extra food as “plan-overs” for later use
- Do some tasks ahead
 - Washing and trimming vegetables
 - Cooking noodles for a pasta salad
 - Cooking lean ground meat for tacos a few hours or the day before needed

Get family members involved

- Have children set the table
- Have an older child pour the milk
- Allow younger children to put ice in glasses
- Have family members cut up fruit and vegetables for a pre-meal snack
- Ask family members to make the salad

Dinner conversation

The goal of dinner time and dinner conversation should be enjoyment, relaxation, and listening to each other. Families should focus on the pleasure of being with each other and on enjoyment. Families should not engage in serious debates during mealtime. Instead mealtime should be a time to focus conversation on the positive. Here are some touch points for dinner conversation:

- Ask everyone to share about their day; everyone should take the time to listen and ask questions
- Parents can use this opportunity to tell stories about family traditions or childhood memories
- Ask children about their school work and assignments
- Tell a joke
- Plan or talk about a family vacation you would like to take
- Take the opportunity when everyone is at the table to decide on tasks for the next day’s meal or discuss upcoming activities and events

Dinner riddles and trivia

- What is the strangest food you have ever eaten?
- Can you think of any songs about food? Sing one!

- What is your favorite food? Why do you like it?
- Can you name a vegetable that is a root? A flower? A stem? A leaf?

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