
Family Meals

Family meals are making a comeback. And that's good news for a couple of reasons:

- Shared family meals are more likely to be nutritious.
- Kids who eat regularly with their families are less likely to snack on unhealthy foods and more likely to eat fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Teens who take part in regular family meals are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, or use marijuana and other drugs, and are more likely to have healthier diets as adults, studies have shown.

Beyond health and nutrition, family meals provide a valuable opportunity to reconnect. This becomes even more important as kids get older.



Making Family Meals Happen

It can be a big challenge to find the time to plan, prepare, and share family meals, then be relaxed enough to enjoy them.

Try these three steps to schedule family meals and make them enjoyable for everyone who pulls up a chair.

1. Plan

To plan more family meals, look over the calendar to choose a time when everyone can be there.

Figure out what's getting in the way of more family meals — busy schedules, no supplies in the house, no time to cook. Ask for the family's help and ideas on how these roadblocks can be removed. For instance, figure out a way to get groceries purchased for a family meal. Or if time to cook is the problem, try doing some prep work on weekends or even completely preparing a dish ahead of time and putting it in the freezer.

2. Prepare

Once you have all your supplies on hand, involve the kids in preparations. Recruiting younger kids can mean a little extra work, but it's often worth it. Simple tasks such as putting plates on the table, tossing the salad, pouring a beverage, folding the napkins, or being a "taster" are appropriate jobs for preschoolers and school-age kids.

Older kids may be able to pitch in even more, such as getting ingredients, washing produce, mixing and stirring, and serving. If you have teens around, consider assigning them a night to cook, with you as the helper.

If kids help out, set a good example by saying please and thanks for their help. Being upbeat and pleasant as you prepare the meal can rub off on your kids. If you're grumbling about the task at hand, chances are they will too. But if the atmosphere is light, you're showing them how the family can work together and enjoy the fruits of its labor.

3. Enjoy

Even if you're thinking of all you must accomplish after dinner's done (doing dishes, making lunches, etc.), try not to focus on that during dinner. Make your time at the table pleasant and a chance for everyone to decompress from the day and enjoy being together as a family.

They may be starving, but have your kids wait until everyone is seated before digging in. Create a moment of calm before the meal begins, so the cook can shift gears. It also presents a chance to say grace, thank the cook, wish everyone a good meal, or to raise a glass of milk and toast each other. You're setting the mood and modeling good manners and patience.



Family meals are a good time to teach civilized behavior that kids also can use at restaurants and others' houses, so establish rules about staying seated, passing items instead of grabbing them, putting napkins on laps, and not talking with your mouth full.

You can gently remind when they break the rules, but try to keep tension and discipline at a minimum during mealtime. The focus should remain on making your kids feel loved, connected, and part of the family.

Keep the interactions positive and let the conversation flow. Ask your kids about their days and tell them about yours. Give everyone a chance to talk.

Need some conversation starters? Here are a few:

- If you could have any food for dinner tomorrow night, what would it be?
 - Who can guess how many potatoes I used to make that bowl of mashed potatoes?
 - What's the most delicious food on the table?
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- If you opened a restaurant, what kind would it be?
- Who's the best cook you know? (We hope they say it's you!)

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Date reviewed: September 2014



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