

Why Should Families Eat Together?

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Growing up in a small house with a large family meant that family meals really signified togetherness. My grandfather made our kitchen table, and it was just big enough for all eight of us to crowd around. The table was set with orange melamine dishes that I think came from detergent boxes, with juice glasses that once held shrimp cocktail. At the head of the table sat my Dad, the master of moving back quickly so that the spilt milk didn't run into his lap. Food was served family style and we always had enough to eat, quite a challenge on a school teacher's salary in the 1950's and 60's.

Fast forward to today. Families are busier than ever between two working parents, sports, music lessons, dance practices and whatever else fills up the day to day schedule. Family meals are often eaten in the car after a quick trip to a fast food restaurant. When kids are at sports practices or one of the parents works a second shift, meals are heated up in the microwave and eaten alone.

Just what are we missing by not having meals together? According to Miriam Weinstein, author of The Surprising Power of Family Meals, "family meals strengthen the bonds that connect with other members of our self-defined clan, shutting out the rest of the world."

Of the teens who shared at least five family dinners a week, only 7% report a great deal of tension or stress between family members. More mealtimes at home was the single strongest factor in better grades, better achievement scores, and fewer behavioral problems in children of all ages. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University has researched family meals for more than a decade. They have found that the more often kids eat dinner with their families; the less likely they are to smoke, drink or use drugs.

Weinstein feels that sharing meals can help cement family relationships. Children learn to share and practice meal time manners. Parents get a chance to model good eating behaviors and learn something about their family.

With all these good results how can we encourage families to eat together more often? What rules make the meals more family time and less of a transition between day and night? Here are some suggestions. Put your family meals on the family calendar. Let everyone know that they are expected to be at the dinner table. If your eating table is often crowded with mail, homework, projects, etc., make an effort to clear the table so that everyone can gather around. Make sure that everyone sits down and faces each other. Turn off the television and don't allow phone calls during dinner. That also means no texting—for parents and children. Mealtimes should be a time for sharing the events of the day.

Some families start the meal by having everyone at the table share something good that happened to them during the day—it can be as simple as finding clean clothes to wear, getting a good grade on a paper, or tackling a tough assignment successfully. The conversation at the table needs to be light and fun. If there are important issues to discuss, like rule infractions, save them for after the meal.

Of course, we must remember the food. It can be as simple as grilled cheese sandwiches with tomato soup or a full turkey dinner. What is eaten isn't as important as the fact that everyone is sharing time together. Time Magazine reported another study that more family meals meant less soda and fried foods and more fruits and vegetables.

If you haven't made family meals a priority, I encourage you to start doing so. The Columbia research project found that family dinners get better with practice. Your first few attempts could be challenging. Keep practicing.

When children enter the teen years it's a challenge to gather them for almost any occasion. If we start eating together when the kids are young, the expectation that they will eat with the family as teenagers has already been established. And we've already identified plus side of families eating together. The CASA study even found that teens wished they ate together more often.

So, think back to when your family of origin ate together. My siblings often laugh at the memories of some kind of fiasco at a meal. My own kids, now off with their own families, take pleasure in remembering mistakes that their Dad or I made. What is important to me is that they remember eating together, not what they ate or who they laughed at, but that for a short time during a busy day, we had a family meal.