



Family Meals

What is the concern?

Busy work schedules, after-school activities and other commitments often lead parents and children to eat at separate times and in separate places. When families don't eat meals together, they miss out on important opportunities to spend time together, make healthy food choices, learn about each others' lives, and enjoy one another's company.

What are the benefits of family meals?

- When parents and children enjoy meals together, they are able to talk about their day and discuss things that are worrying them, which often makes everyone feel closer.
- Eating together gives parents the chance to teach children healthy eating habits by demonstrating and encouraging appropriate food choices and portion sizes.
- Children who regularly eat family meals tend to eat more fruits and vegetables and less junk food than those who rarely eat with their parents. These children are less likely to become overweight or obese.
- Children who regularly eat family meals are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as smoking or using drugs and alcohol.
- For teens, eating as a family can lead to better communication and help them to feel more able to confide in their parents.

How do you encourage family meals?

1. Plan ahead.

- Meal Times: Try to engage in as many family meals as you can each week. Depending upon your family's schedule, it may be necessary to eat earlier or later on some days. At times when it is challenging to schedule a family dinner, consider sitting down together for another meal, such as a weekend lunch, or even a midday snack.
- Menus: Remember that the food served to your family does not have to be complicated. Simple dishes like scrambled eggs, soup, and sandwiches can be prepared quickly and can be healthy and delicious. Also, try to keep your pantry stocked with frequently used grocery items for simple, healthy meals that your family enjoys.

2. Let everyone help.

- Allow children to participate in planning, preparing, or cooking the meals. Even young children can help with simple tasks, such as setting the table, washing vegetables, measuring or tossing a salad. When kids are involved in planning and preparing meals, they may be more likely to make healthy choices and try new foods.
- Serve the meal family style, in which dishes are placed on the table and everyone serves themselves. This will encourage children to pay attention to hunger and fullness cues. It also provides opportunities to teach communication skills and manners.

3. Set the stage.

A family meal is ideally eaten at a table. All televisions, phones and hand-held electronic devices are turned off. Parents and children alike should not talk on the phone, text or read e-mails during a family meal.

4. Create a positive atmosphere.

All family members should wait to begin eating until everyone is ready and seated at the table. Family members can take turns talking about their day and perhaps sharing something interesting or positive that happened during the day.

Tips to Remember:

- Planning ahead takes some time but will save you time in the long run. Plan meal times, menus, and grocery lists ahead of time.
- Getting all family members involved in the meal will contribute to children's skill development and will help the family enjoy spending time together.
- Keeping a positive attitude about family meals will help your children keep a positive attitude.
- If these suggestions do not work, please talk with your pediatrician for more ideas.

References

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