

The Importance of the Family Meal

In our hurried lives, sometimes we overlook the importance of simple steps to help children and families become strong and healthy. Eating together as a family helps children long after the meal is over. There are many good reasons to promote family meals

Family meals lead to better nutrition. They provide more fruits, vegetables, grains, calcium-rich foods, protein, iron, fiber and Vitamins A, C, E, B-6 and folate. Family meals expose children to a greater variety of foods and lower the intake of soft drinks and snack foods. Children who eat with their families end up making healthier snack choices when their parents are not around.

Family meals improve family relationships and emotional health. Families become more connected when the ritual of the family meal is practiced daily. Children from families where the meals are eaten together are more likely to be emotionally content and have good peer relationships. As these children grow, they work harder in school, have better communication with their parents and enjoy stronger family ties.

Family meals improve learning. Children who eat with their families have improved vocabularies and reading skills. The time spent together around the table provides a chance for important conversations. It's a time to tell stories and share experiences. It is also a time to learn social skills such as table manners and taking turns.

As children grow older, those who eat family meals have fewer risk-taking behaviors. Teens who eat dinner with their families five times a week or more are less likely to take drugs, feel depressed or get into trouble. Young children who learn the habit of eating as a family are more likely to be present for family meals when they are teens.

Tips for making family meals work:

- Plan ahead. It is difficult to come up with an idea for a meal when you are hungry and tired. Try to have food in the house and an idea of what to make before you get home with the kids.
- Involve the whole family. Prepare, serve and clean up together. Children love to participate and are more likely to try new foods if they help to prepare them. Include children with disabilities in every aspect of family meal time, from the process of preparing to serving, conversation and clean up.
- Meal time should be a happy time, enjoyed together as a family. Avoid power struggles over food. Be sensitive to normal developmental behaviors, for example, young children may not be able to sit at the table for a long time and they are often messy.
- Leave the TV turned off. Avoid the distraction of a television. Focus on the conversation and enjoying your food!

Conversations starters:

Get the conversation going at the dinner table by asking open ended questions like "Can you tell us something that happened today that made you feel happy?" or "Did anything happen today that made you feel sad?" or "Did anything happen today that made you laugh?" Help your children join the conversation by letting them know you care about what they think and feel.

Resources

NAP SACC, Workshops for Child Care Providers: Working with Families, for more information, <https://gonapsacc.org/>

Fiese, B., Schwartz, M., Society for Research in Child Development, 2008, Reclaiming the Family Table: Mealtimes and Child Health and Well Being



California Childcare Health Program
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