
Everyone to the Table: Family Meals Serve You Well

Facts of Family Meals

Recently, 40% of teens surveyed reported that they had meals with their family three to six times the previous week. However, one third of those surveyed reported eating with their family two or fewer times the previous week, with 14% eating no meals with family. A 2007 study revealed that only 65% of 15-year-olds in the United States reported eating the main meal of the day with their parents "several times per week"--one of the lowest levels of all wealthy countries surveyed.



Why are family meals attracting so much attention in the media and from researchers?

Family meals have become an accepted indicator of the quality of family relationships. As parents, educators, researchers, social service organizations, and government programs search for answers about the well-being of the American family, it is apparent that family meals tell a lot about how those families become and stay connected.

Why eat together?

Regular family meals offer such benefits as optimal nutrition and positive family communication. Despite all the directions families are pulled in today, parents are still the biggest influence on the food and meal habits of their children.

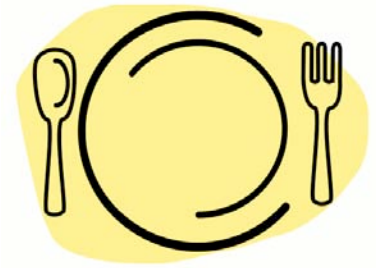
Family meals provide a great amount of good, in a variety of ways, for the entire family. Very young children who share family meals show improved literacy skills when compared with children who did not have family meal opportunities. Children and adolescents who share meals with their parents have improved food habits--they tend to eat more fruits, vegetables, and dairy foods, and less fried food and soft drinks at meals eaten with their families. Older adults who share meals with family and friends benefit not only by eating better, but also from the increased socialization. Intergenerational family meals help preserve and pass along family culture, traditions, and values.

How often a family eats dinner together is a powerful indicator of whether a teen is likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs and whether the teen is likely to perform well academically. Family meals help protect adolescents from developing disordered eating behaviors, according to a study done in 2004. Another study found that efforts to encourage and include adolescents in family meals and food preparation not only affect the child or teen as an individual, but also his or her interactions with family, school

performance, and relationships in the community and beyond. In other words, family meals help improve youths' diet quality and their school and psychological performance.

Ellyn Satter, a child-feeding specialist, shares eight strengths of family meals:

- Meals support food regulation and appropriate growth.
- They make you a family.
- Meals support good parenting.
- They provide children with social and emotional support.
- They connect people to their history.
- Meals reassure children they will be fed.
- They teach children to behave well in polite company.
- Meals teach children to like a variety of foods.



The power of family meals reaches even further, according to Satter. Her research shows that family meals can help solve childhood weight problems. How? By putting food, the feeding experience, and family dynamics in a most positive perspective, family meals become strong building blocks in growing healthy, competent eaters--that is, eaters who trust their own abilities to make sure they get adequate amounts of enjoyable, nourishing food, and are positive and comfortable with eating.

Family meals can be flexible.

It is important to note that family meals can include eating with anyone you love, care for, live with, or who cares about you. It is the feeling of sharing and support that comes from being together that makes family meals so valuable.

Family meals aren't necessarily limited to dinners--consider family breakfasts as possibilities for meals together. If time is an issue, set the alarm clock, and start the day on a positive note.

What gets in the way of family meals?

There are many reasons for the shared meal disappearing from the family dinner table. One reason is not that children, adolescents, or parents are not interested. The most frequently given barrier for fewer family meals than desired was "schedule conflicts". Whether it comes down to parents' work or social schedules or kids' sport and activity schedules, it seems that there just is no time for family meals today. Other reasons might be

- There is no time to cook or shop.
- Family members lack knowledge of parenting or cooking skills.
- It is just not pleasant.
- No one likes the same foods.

And if there is the time and will, is the meal

- Eaten in the car while hurrying to the next event?
- Shared in front of the television or eaten with headphones on?
- A family priority?

Where can you begin?

If family meals are not common for your family, it might seem difficult to know how to get started. Talk over your plan of action with other adults who feed your child, and then talk with your child. What's the next step? Act the plan! Meals don't need to be home-cooked masterpieces in order to serve the purpose. If you have a mental image of a Norman Rockwell-style holiday feast when you think of family meals, let that thought go! Instead, focus on familiar foods that fit the time, skills, and favor of your family. A "family meal mentality" probably won't happen overnight. Old habits can take a long time to change, and family meals will be easier to accomplish if started when children are young. But even if children are older, the benefits of family meals are well worth the effort. The keys are realistic expectations and consistency. Start from where you, and your family, are. Be flexible and keep trying. Here are some tools to use:

- Turn off the television. Remember, it is not a member of the family. Let phone calls wait until later. Make sharing the meal the priority.
- Share the effort of putting a meal on the table. You will find the benefits are also shared!
- Avoid making too many rules for mealtime. Instead, try to model the actions and behavior you would like children to exhibit.
- Use "conversation starters," if needed, to keep a discussion going. Other families may need to practice taking turns to let everyone have a chance to speak uninterrupted.
- Keep the meal pleasant. Try to make mealtimes together a positive time.

Consider Ellyn Satter's "division of responsibility" in feeding to keep family meals peaceful and positive:

- Parents are responsible for the what, when, and where of feeding.
- Children are responsible for the how much and whether of eating.

There is no one single environment when it comes to family meals--and those numerous environments mean every family, every schedule, every mealtime is unique. But even though there may be barriers, it is possible to work through them and make successful family meals happen for you and your family.

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