

Eating Family Meals Together at Home

Eating meals at home together as a family is important for both parents and children.

Eating dinner together at least 3 or 4 times per week has positive effects on child development and has been linked to children's lower rates of overweight and obesity, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, depression, and eating disorders; higher self-esteem; and better academic performance. Eating family meals also has nutritional benefits. Families who eat dinner together eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer fried foods and sugary drinks. Family meals also help adults and children learn to like a variety of foods.

When eating together, families should try to get rid of distractions from phones, televisions, and computers by keeping them off and away from the table. This encourages conversation and gives children a chance to express themselves, be heard, and practice active listening. It also gives children a sense of togetherness and makes them feel secure. We recommend giving everyone a chance to talk and participate. Talk about each other's day (eg, "What is one thing you felt thankful for today?" or "What is the funniest thing that happened to you today?" or "What is something you wish you could change about today?"), your child's hopes for the future (eg, "Where do you think you will live when you grow up?"), and age-appropriate current events both in your family and in the news (eg, "What do you hope we will do this weekend?").

If family meals are something new, first work on making family meals happen, then focus on what food is served later. At mealtime, the parent's job is to provide structure. The parent decides when mealtimes occur and that meals are eaten while sitting at the table without distractions (phones, televisions, tablets, etc). Parents also choose what foods are offered, ensuring the foods are age appropriate. From the foods the parent provides, the child is responsible for deciding what and how much to eat. Parents should avoid negotiating (eg, thank you bites or "eat 2 bites of this"), hiding foods (eg, hiding vegetables in pasta sauces, meatballs, or baked goods), or using food as a reward (eg, "eat your broccoli and you can have dessert"). When eating family meals, it is important for parents to eat with their children instead of just feeding them. Pairing a new food with foods you know your children like will help make mealtimes easier.

Many parents worry about what to make for meals. It does not have to be fancy! It is easiest when you plan ahead for meals, so try using a meal planner or calendar. Offer at least 1 fruit and 1 veg-

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Family meal time is linked to many benefits for children

- ✓ Lower rates of obesity, overweight, and eating disorders
- ✓ Higher self-esteem and better academic performance
- ✓ Lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and depression
- ✓ Better nutrition and learning about a variety of healthy foods

Make the most of family meal time



- Avoid distractions by keeping computers, phones, and television away from the table.
- Encourage conversation and active listening by making sure everyone has a chance to talk and express themselves.
- It is important to eat with your children rather than just feeding them.

Family meals should be easy and low stress

- Plan meals in advance. They can be simple as long as they include at least 1 fruit and 1 vegetable (fresh, frozen, or canned are all acceptable).
- Include your children in meal planning, preparation, and cleanup.
- Any meal (not just dinner) is a great time to sit down and connect with your family.



etable; these can be frozen, fresh, or canned. Involve kids in the meal planning, preparation, and cleanup. If dinners are a hard time to come together, other meals can also be a chance to sit down together to eat, connect, and talk. Most importantly, have fun! We want our children to learn to love eating and to enjoy meals with family and friends.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/>

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/growing-healthy/>

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/nutrition/Pages/Making-Healthy-Food-Choices.aspx>

<https://www.wakehealth.edu/specialty/b/brenner-fit/cook-eat-play-repeat>

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Published Online: March 25, 2024. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.6669

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

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