

# Family Mealtime A How-To Guide

*Ingrid Adams and Anna Cason, Dietetics and Human Nutrition*



Do you ever wish you had more time to talk, laugh and have fun with your family? There is a simple solution – the family meal. Everyone needs to eat. Why not find a time that all of you can sit down for a family meal? It is a perfect time to talk.

Eating four to five meals together each week helps children develop social skills, strengthens family bonds, and promotes good communication. It also gives children a sense of security and lets them know that their family is there for them. Family mealtime provides benefits for everyone involved. Having regular family meals is a challenge to many but the following suggestions can make it easier to make family mealtime a reality.

## Make family mealtime a priority.

- Set a regular time for family meals. Eating together every night of the week might not be possible.
- Enjoy more table time and less cooking time.
- Keep table time realistic—not too long so that mealtime becomes a chore.

## Just do it. Every journey begins with a first step.

- Begin by having at least one or two meals a week. This could be Saturday lunch or dinner or Sunday brunch.
- Be creative about where you will eat together. Family mealtime does not always have to be in your home. Meals can also be enjoyed on the go. One of the secrets to keeping family mealtime is being flexible.
- Plan ahead every week to anticipate work, school, and other activities that affect mealtime.

## Meal Planning

- Plan simple, quick meals.
- Use cookbooks and grocery ads to write menus.
- Read recipes from start to finish, and make a shopping list of items needed.
- Stock up on basic items such as meat, beans, rice, pasta, canned vegetables, and fruits.
- Use what you have in your cupboard or refrigerator to come up with meal suggestions.
- Consider leftovers when planning meals.

## Meal Preparation and Cooking

Cook several meals when you have more time, perhaps on weekends, and store them in the refrigerator. Even if you cannot prepare the entire meal in advance, completing the main dish helps. Preparing a side dish to go along with the entrée usually takes less time.

Use a slow cooker. An entire meal can be prepared before leaving for work and be ready when you come home for dinner.

Do some tasks ahead of time:

- Wash and trim vegetables when appropriate.
- Cook noodles for a pasta salad.
- Cook lean ground meat for tacos or spaghetti sauce the day before, and store it in the refrigerator.

Get family members involved:

- Have children set the table.
- Have an older child pour the milk.
- Allow younger children to put ice in glasses.
- Have family members cut up fruit and vegetables for a pre-meal snack.
- Ask family members to make the salad.
- Have individuals take turns or share the task of cleaning up.

## Dinner Conversation

Put phones away and turn televisions and tablets off. Enjoy each other's company, and use this opportunity to talk and connect.

Make dinner conversation enjoyable by focusing on the pleasure of being with each other. Focus on positive rather than the negative. Here are some points for dinner conversation:

- Ask everyone to share about their day. Encourage everyone to take the time to listen and ask questions of the person who is sharing.
- Parents can use this opportunity to talk about family traditions and childhood memories.
- Ask kids about their schoolwork and assignments.
- Tell a joke.
- Plan or talk about a family vacation you would like to take.
- Take the opportunity when everyone is at the table to decide on tasks for the next day's meal, or upcoming activities and events.

Take it one step at a time to make family mealtime a reality and feel the benefits for everyone involved.

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