Making Mealtimes Pleasant

Family mealtime used to be a core daily activity in the United States, but it is becoming a lost art in many homes.

Families often are too busy to sit down together around the dinner table, partly due to both parents working and the large number of single parent households. Unfortunately, family members often eat at different times, or they eat alone in separate corners of the house while watching TV, playing video games, talking on the phone, etc.

Many American families are caught in a time crunch, and eating meals together falls down their priority list. They blame hectic work and school schedules due to: after-school jobs; clubs; sports; dance lessons; music lessons; homework; a house to clean; clothes to wash; an older parent to care for and many other obligations.

Today only about 28% of families eat together seven nights per week, and 24% eat together less than three nights a week. A report in *USA Today* states that only 25% of families spend more than 31 minutes together at the dinner table on weeknights.

Most families eat out occasionally, but the good news is that meals prepared at home have increased. A 2004 report showed that 77% of all meals now come from home.

**Why Eat Together?**

Children learn important lessons and skills during mealtime, including positive eating habits that last a lifetime. Although it may seem impossible to get everyone together for a meal, the benefits of making family mealtime a tradition are worth pursuing.

**Nutrition:** Besides saving money, studies show that most people who eat meals with family or friends eat a wider variety of healthful foods. Parents should be good role models and teach children to eat nutritious foods, try new foods, and use good table manners.

Obesity has become one of America's most serious health problems. Childhood obesity has doubled, and adolescent obesity has tripled. Children who eat regularly with their families generally have healthier eating patterns. They consume more fruits and vegetables and less fried foods, soft drinks and saturated fat. This helps them maintain a healthy weight, and it may be one of the best weapons against the national obesity epidemic.

According to a study reported in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, kids in families who regularly ate meals together had diets higher in calcium, iron, folate, fiber and several vitamins than kids who didn't eat meals with their families. In another nationwide survey of 18,000 adolescents reported in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, kids who had most of their evening meals with one or more parents ate more fruits, vegetables and dairy products than adolescents who usually didn't eat dinner with a parent.

**Tradition:** Food served at the family table helps to shape and give lasting meaning to our cultural heritage. Positive food memories created during childhood are cherished for a lifetime.

For example, a family's Thanksgiving tradition is to gather at Grandma's house and dine on turkey served with a variety of Southern side dishes, including green beans, squash casserole, cornbread dressing, and sweet potatoes. Warm mealtime
memories are made as the children listen to the
grownups share stories about the "good 'ole days."

**Family Bond:** Emotionally healthy families spend
time together on a routine basis, including family
mealtime. Close bonds and lifelong memories can
be created at the family table.

If possible, eat around a table instead of sitting side-
by-side at the kitchen counter. This allows for eye
contact with other family members and makes it
easier to talk and listen to each other.

Family meals don't have to consist of seven courses.
Members can enjoy good conversation and
reconnect with one another just as easily over a
meal of soup and sandwiches.

Mealtime, especially dinner, is an ideal time for
families to share daily events, reconnect and deepen
relationships. By sitting down together for a meal,
families can communicate with each other and find
out what is happening in each other 's lives. In
contrast, families who don't eat together regularly
may miss valuable opportunities to talk and
strengthen relationships.

Research shows that most kids who eat dinner with
their families every night of the week tend to:
  • feel good about themselves.
  • spend more time studying.
  • participate in productive activities.
  • make better grades in school.

These kids also are less likely to drink alcohol,
smoke, get into fights, use illegal drugs, or get
suspended from school.

**Ways to Make the Most of Family Mealtimes**
The average American household spends a total of
65 minutes nightly on dinner, including 35 minutes
for preparation and 30 minutes for eating. This
accounts for a large part of the time that families
spend together every day.

Here are some simple, easy ways to make mealtime
a pleasant experience for your entire family.

**Serve Nutritious Meals:** Family members will be
healthier and happier, their chances of getting tired
or sick will be reduced, and they will have more
energy to perform better at school and work.

The parent's job is to offer a variety of healthful
foods in a pleasant atmosphere, while the children's
job is to choose whether or not to eat and how
much. To make smart choices from every food
group, refer to HGIC 4010, MyPyramid and HGIC
4011, MyPyramid for Kids.

**Set Regular Times for Family Meals:** This
improves children's chances of eating a variety of
foods to grow, stay healthy, and maintain a healthy
weight. When meals are served on time, children
don't come to the table extremely hungry or
grumpy.

**Let Children Know When Dinner Will Be
Served:** Give a "5-minute warning" so that children
can complete what they are doing. They are less
likely to come to the table with negative feelings
about having to stop in the middle of an activity.

**Select Meals When Everyone can Eat Together:**
On Sunday, compare family members' schedules for
the upcoming week. Select times when all members
can eat together, both at home and away.

If eating dinner together is impossible due to work
or school schedules, then pick another mealtime.
Breakfast may work best.

**Make Meals Simple & Quick:** Spend more time at
the table and less time in the kitchen. Simple food
served with love and laughter is better than
elaborate menu items. Even a cold sandwich meal
tastes good and seems special if everyone is relaxed
and the mealtime is filled with caring and laughter.

**Get Everyone Involved in the Preparation:**
Encourage children to help plan menus, prepare
meals and clean up the kitchen. This teaches them
teamwork and cooperation.

According to a recent survey, 38% of family cooks
said that children have a big influence on what is
bought and prepared, so get them involved in
cooking and buying groceries. Older children and
teens learn how to stay within a budget by creating
a grocery list and/or shopping for food.
Kids are more likely to eat meals when they are involved in the planning and preparation. Even if the parent can work faster alone, children feel important when asked to help. Small children can measure and mix ingredients, tear salad greens, put bread in a basket, and set the table. This is also an opportunity to teach them food preparation skills and food safety techniques.

**Serve Favorite Foods:** Reduce negative moods and children's temper tantrums by including at least one food that each family member likes at every meal.

**Encourage Good Conversation:** Focus on positive, uninterrupted conversation that involves everyone. Talk about positive events of the day or upcoming family activities.

**Eliminate Interruptions & Distractions:** Turn off the TV or radio during mealtime. Let the answering machine take messages, and return phone calls after meals. Get caller I.D. so that emergency calls can be answered (e.g. a call from an ill parent). Put pets in another room if they demand attention at mealtime.

**Keep the Discussion Positive:** Avoid talking about discipline issues or other problems. Share positive events that happened during the day. Let children give their thoughts, because they listen and learn by feeling included. Topics of conversation could be:

- what happened at school or work.
- plans for the weekend.
- sports activities.
- current events.

Try using some preplanned questions to improve family conversation. Here are some samples:

- What happened recently that made you feel really happy?
- Pretend that someone gave you $1,000. Before you can buy something for yourself, you have to spend some of it on your family. What would you buy for everyone?
- Who would you choose if you could spend an afternoon with a famous person, living or dead?

**Make Mealtime Relaxing:** Slow down and enjoy the family's time together. Children generally eat slower than adults, so take your time and enjoy a few extra minutes at the table. Resist the temptation to rush through the meal and get up to start cleaning immediately.

**The Importance of Table Manners**
Eating meals together as a family helps children develop good table manners, usually by watching and listening to parents. It is a comfortable setting for practicing social skills and manners.

Children must be taught table manners, because they do not learn these skills by themselves. Some skills that children should be taught include:

- setting a table.
- using a fork, knife and spoon correctly.
- using a napkin properly.
- waiting for others to be served before starting to eat.
- passing dishes of food from left to right.
- taking small bites of food.
- chewing with a closed mouth.
- never talking with the mouth full.
- being polite, saying "please" and "thank you."
- waiting until everyone finishes eating before leaving the table.
- removing a hat or cap at the dinner table.

To strengthen children's etiquette skills, take them to restaurants. When entertaining at home, let children set the table and serve the appetizers. Basic etiquette skills are essential once they begin dating and enter the work world.

**Conclusion**
Family meals should be happy, relaxed times for members to interact and spend time together. They strengthen communications and provide a sense of family unity.

Make family mealtimes a priority. Consider dropping at least one activity to add time for them. Set a goal to enjoy at least one family meal together every week.

"Please pass the love, unity, and spaghetti."
Connie Evers, registered dietitian.

**Sources:**


7. Miller, Barbara. *The Importance of Table Manners*. Nourishing News (September 2002), Clemson University Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition and EFNEP.