



The Importance of Family Dinners¹

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Introduction

In many of today's households, family dinners have become a thing of the past. With busy schedules held by both parents and children, many families rarely have time to eat dinner together. In recent years, nutrition professionals have been promoting family dinners as research demonstrates the benefits that eating together can provide to family members.

You may be wondering, "Why are family dinners so important?" Research has suggested that having dinner as a family on a regular basis has positive effects on the development of adolescents. Family dinners have been linked to a lower risk of obesity, substance abuse, eating disorders, and increased chance of graduating from high school. This document takes a closer look at some of these "dinner dynamics."

Conversation

Conversations at the dinner table expand the vocabulary and reading ability of children. This benefit is not dependent on the socio-economic status of a family; children in all families do better when they engage in dinner conversations. Dinner conversations allow children the opportunity to talk

to their parents and siblings and to have an active voice within the family. They also provide opportunities for children to listen to others as well as express their own opinions. Family dinners allow every member of the family a chance to discuss his or her day and share any exciting news.

Suggestions for Conversation

- Discuss the child's day. Ask questions that express your interest in your child's daily life.
- Discuss current events. Bring up news appropriate to the age of your child.
- Pick and choose. Create topics together; write them on a piece of paper and randomly choose one to discuss each night.
- Let all family members talk. Be an active listener and be sure your child learns to listen as well.
- Encourage your child to participate. Do not underestimate your child's ability to hold a conversation.

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Nutritional quality of the diet

Eating dinner as a family has been shown to increase the intake of fruits and vegetables, which provide a variety of nutrients and dietary fiber. Families who eat dinner together as a family tend to have a higher rate of eating the recommended intake of fruit and vegetables. (For specific food group recommendations at various calorie intakes, visit the website <http://www.mypyramid.gov/>.) Some studies also have shown that families who eat dinner together tend to eat fewer fried foods and drink less soda. Family meal frequency also is positively linked to the intake of protein, calcium, and some vitamins.

Suggestions for mealtime

- Make cooking a family activity and include everyone in the preparation process.
- Try fun recipes or old recipes with healthier alternatives.
- Have theme nights such as Italian night, Mexican night, or Caribbean night.
- Create your own original recipes using low-fat ingredients.
- Have family cook-offs.

Development of Assets

Internal assets such as having a positive outlook on personal future and a positive identity are linked to the frequency of family dinners. High-risk behaviors, such as smoking, are less frequent among families who eat meals together more frequently. Concerning boundaries and parental expectations, families who have regular family dinners are more likely to understand, acknowledge, and follow boundaries than those who do not eat dinner together. Self-esteem, motivation, and a decrease in high-risk behaviors are all related to the amount of time spent with family, especially during family dinners.

Final Family Dinner Suggestions

- Have family dinners at least four to five times a week.

- Turn off TV, radio, MP3 players, and the like during dinner.
- Enjoy positive conversation during the meal.
- Spend at least an hour eating dinner, conversing, and cleaning up together.

Online Resources

Family Dinners (Child Trends DataBank) <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/archivepgs/96.htm>

Get involved: The Importance of Family Mealtime (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) <http://family.samhsa.gov/get/mealtime.aspx>

Food group recommendations throughout the lifecycle, nutrition information, recipes, and more: <http://www.mypyramid.gov/>

Additional Resources

Weinstein, M. (2005). *The surprising power of family meals: How eating together makes us smarter, stronger, healthier, and happier*. Steerforth Press, Hanover: NH.

Goldfarb, A. (2006). *The Six o'clock scramble: Quick, healthy and delicious dinner recipes for busy families*. St. Martin's Press, NY.

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