

WHY FAMILY MEALTIME MATTERS

Experts everywhere agree: Sharing meals helps cement family relationships, no matter how you define ‘family.’ “Sitting down to a meal together draws a line around us,” says Miriam Weinstein, author of *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*. “It encloses us and, for a brief time, strengthens the bonds that connect us with other members of our self-defined clan, shutting out the rest of the world.”



In study after study, the beneficial impact of family mealtime has been demonstrated for children of all ages. Better grades, healthier eating habits, closer relationships to parents and siblings, ability to resist negative peer pressure, resilience in the face of life's problems – all these are outcomes of simply sharing dinner on a regular basis. Consider these research findings:

- Children depend on their parents for the ABCs of good health. 71% say they get information about how to be healthy from their mother; 43% from their father.
- 19% of teens who have fewer than three family dinners per week report that there is a great deal of tension or stress between family members, compared to 7% of teens who have at least five family dinners per week.
- More mealtime at home was the single strongest factor in better achievement scores and fewer behavioral problems in children all ages. More meals at home also resulted in less obesity.
- Because feeding is the most basic animal form of caring, sharing meals is one of the most central family bonds.
- Through the mini lessons of table manners, children learn to share and think of others. By saying “please” and “thank you,” we recognize the humanity of our tablemate, acknowledging the fact that we both deserve respect.
- More than a decade of research by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University has found that the more often kids eat dinner with their families, the less like they are to smoke, drink or use drugs.
- To make it easier to get the whole family gathered at the table at the same time, we’ve compiled this list of helpful strategies. With just a little effort, your family can be healthier and happier – simply by taking the time to sit down to eat together daily.

Encouraging Family Meals

- Recognize the importance of mealtime. Get the family together and discuss the benefits of dining as a group. Talk about research that documents the power of sharing this time together.
- Identify obstacles to mealtime. Coordinating schedules can be tough, but it can be done. Despite late work hours, after-school activities, and long commutes, many families are still able to make dinnertime a priority.
- Make a schedule. Set the expectation that family members will gather at specific times during the week for mealtime. These meeting times should be considered as important as soccer practice, hair appointments, club meetings, or other distractions.

- Turn off the television. People who watch television while eating tend to tune out their natural hunger and satiety cues, which encourages overeating.
- Serve a variety of foods for a variety of tastes. Avoid meal-time battles by creating menus with something for every member of the family.
- Make a commitment as a family. Get the whole clan together and promise each other: "We will share mealtime as a family." Live up to that promise and watch your family grow closer and stronger.

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