

The purpose of this information sheet is to educate families on the importance of making family meals a priority and to share suggestions and resources for creating positive mealtime experiences.

## Why are Family Mealtimes so Important?

Family meals offer opportunities to develop strong parent-child relationships and promote family bonding. Time spent eating a meal together gives families a chance to enjoy each other's company, share conversations, and learn about each other. Children and youth have an opportunity to talk their feelings and important school, extracurricular, and social issues. Parents can tune into their child's emotional well-being, offer ways to cope with challenges, and embed mental health promotion strategies (see #2, Promoting Family Mental Health).

## Benefits of Family Meals

Sharing family meals is associated with greater academic achievement, resilience, and self-esteem. Both the quantity and quality of family meals are important for improving family mental health. When families have more meals together, teens demonstrate better emotional wellbeing and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety. They also tend to have better nutrition and show fewer risky behaviors.<sup>1,2</sup> Sharing a family meal also offers a chance to talk about nutrition, individual tastes, and food preferences. Lastly, involving children in the full range of activities that make up having a family meal provides a lot of opportunities to teach important life skills necessary for an independent and healthy adulthood. Examples include: planning a menu, finding and reading recipes, grocery shopping, cooking, setting the table, serving food, and cleaning up after the meal.

## What is Meaningful Mealtime?

A meaningful mealtime is when the family enjoys eating a meal together giving full attention to each other. By limiting distractions, including cell phones and television, the focus is placed on the quality of interaction between family members.<sup>3</sup>

Enjoy Eating a Meal Together!



## General Recommendations

1. **Plan a minimum of 3-4 family meals per week** (including breakfast, lunch, and dinner).
2. **Plan a menu of meals for the week.** Talk about meal planning with your children and request their input on what they'd like to eat. Have your child write out the grocery list and help with the grocery shopping.
3. **Create a positive mealtime environment.** Turn off electronics. Set the table so that it looks inviting (e.g. attractive placemats, absent of clutter, scented candle, flowers). Play calming classical music. Make dinner feel special.
4. **Involve children in meal preparation, setting the table and serving, and clean up.** This helps children feel a part of the entire mealtime process.
5. **Value time together.** Even if a particular meal feels hectic, recognize that the act of being together and eating can create feelings of closeness, comfort, and stability.
6. **Parents should model and encourage mealtime etiquette** (e.g. proper use of eating utensils, napkin, chewing with one's mouth closed, and manners).
7. **Make mealtime conversations matter.** Commit to having meaningful and enjoyable conversations that allow all family members to talk and share their thoughts and feelings.
8. **Seven ways to be a better listener:** 1. Stop whatever you are doing; 2. Look your child in the eye; 3. Pay attention to nonverbal messages; 4. Do Not Interrupt; 5. Ask questions to encourage more conversation; 6. Check that you understood your child correctly; 7. Ask open-ended questions to foster conversation.<sup>4</sup>

## Website Resource: Family Dinner Project

This website (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org>) offers a variety of family-friendly information and ideas for making mealtimes meaningful. The Family Dinner Project is a nonprofit organization operating from the Project Zero offices at Harvard University.

**Conversation tab:** Offers ideas for having developmentally appropriate conversations for 3 different ages.

- 'Conversation starters' provide a variety of interesting questions to start a conversation. E.g. If you were a season, what season would you be?
- 'Pickles and Predicaments' help families talk about what to do when in a dilemma with questions to guide conversation.
- 'Challenging Conversations' help families talk about life's challenges and what to do. E.g. Talking about bullying.
- 'Recipe for Conversation Shareables'. Each card presents a topic to talk about and includes a 'recipe' for conversation starters. E.g. Talk about managing stress.
- 'Conversation Starter Shareables'. Each attractive card provides a one-question conversation starter. E.g. If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you want to live?

**Fun tab:** Offers creative activities and recipes.

- 'Fun with food prep'. Offers age-appropriate games, crafts, and activities surrounding food preparation.
- 'Between dinner and dessert'. Fun activities are offered to help keep children at the table after dinner. E.g. Design and create your own placemat.

**Food tab:** Provides a large selection of recipes organized under different categories such as 'One Pot Wonders', 'Comfort Foods', and 'Before & Afters' (appetizers & desserts). Recipes come with attractive photos and clear instructions.

## Resources

<sup>4</sup>Nicholaus, B., & McGrath, T. (2009). *The Meal Box*. Loyola Press. This is a deck of cards that provides fun questions and family faith tips to get mealtime conversations started. E.g. 'If you could open the back door to your house and step out into the perfect backyard, what would the yard be like? Be specific.'

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<sup>1</sup>Utter, J., Denny, S., Peiris-John, P., Moselen, E., Dyson, B., & Clark, T. (2017). Family meals and adolescent emotional well-being: Findings from a national study. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 49(1), 67-72.e1

<sup>2</sup>Elgar, F. J., Craig, W., & Trites, S. (2013). Family dinners, communication, and mental health in Canadian adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health* (52) 4, 433-438.

<sup>3</sup>Cook, E. & Dunifon, R. (2012). Do family meals really make a difference? Parenting in Context. Cornell University College of Human Ecology. Retrieved from <https://www.human.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/PAM/Parenting/Family-Mealtimes-2.pdf>