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Benefits of Family Meals: Eat Together, Thrive Together

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Does it seem the busier your family gets, the slimmer the chances you'll see each other at dinner (or any other meal, for that matter)?

If you answered yes, don't feel guilty. Life demands a lot of everyone, your kids included—and many families find it hard to block out time for shared meals. But here's something that might motivate you to change things up: kids who eat with their families at least 3 times a week enjoy hearty physical, emotional, social and academic (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/about-us/benefits-of-family-dinners/>) perks.



Read on to learn about the benefits of eating together as a family, along with practical tips to make it easier and get the most out of shared mealtime.

5 reasons to carve out time for family meals

Time spent enjoying a simple breakfast, lunch or dinner together helps you:

Introduce your kids to tasty, healthy foods

This boosts their intake of key nutrients while increasing the chances they'll pick (/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/Picky-Eaters.aspx) similar foods when they're away from home. Double win!

Fuel young brains & bodies

Kids grow and develop through puberty and beyond. Amazingly, the human brain (/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/Babys-First-1000-Days-AAP-Policy-Explained.aspx) doesn't reach full maturity until we hit our mid-20s. Good eating habits matter at every age and stage – which might be one reason family meals are linked with school success. (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/research-shows-family-dinner-improves-literacy/>)

Help everyone eat healthier & maintain a healthy weight

Families who eat together not only tend to eat more nutritious, balanced meals but they also find it easier (https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2816155?guestAccessKey=37e5a876-ccd7-4733-86b8-7b2915cac990&utm_source=silverchair&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=article_alert-jamapediatrics&utm_term=mostread&utm_content=olf-widget_03292024&adv=003546731412#249573015) to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. This benefits the whole family, including children, teens, and adults who may have either a low or high body-mass index (BMI (/English/health-issues/conditions/obesity/Pages/Body-Mass-Index-Formula.aspx)).

Enhance mental health

Shared mealtimes give you the chance to talk, express love, concern and understanding for each other. Research links family meals with healthy mental development (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Confidence/Pages/healthy-mental-and-emotional-development-in-children-key-building-blocks.aspx) and lower risks (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2816155>) for childhood depression (/English/health-

issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/childhood-depression-what-parents-can-do-to-help.aspx), eating disorders (/English/news/Pages/Identifying-and-Treating-Eating-Disorders.aspx), substance use (/English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/default.aspx) and other mental health concerns. [Back to top](#)

Model healthy habits

Kids who help prepare food at home can learn a lot about cooking (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cooking-With-Your-Children.aspx), meal planning and the value of daily routines. Time at the table can also teach communication skills (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Components-of-Good-Communication.aspx) and introduce good food as one of life's greatest pleasures.

Real-world tips for successful family meals

Go for practical, not perfect

You don't have to eat every meal together, and you don't even have to cook! Sandwiches and fruit or tasty leftovers from earlier in the week will do just fine. If weeknight dinners don't always work, try breakfast (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Breakfast-for-Learning.aspx) or brunch on the weekends to round out the plan.

Keep the menu simple

There aren't any hard-and-fast rules, but do serve at least one vegetable or fruit (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Get-Your-Child-to-Eat-More-Fruits-and-Veggies.aspx) every time (fresh, frozen or canned with no added sugar). Meal plans can include the same dishes each week if everyone likes them. Drop by myplate.gov (<http://myplate.gov/>) for inspiration, including tips for healthy, budget-friendly meals (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/feeding-your-family-right-on-a-budget-how-to-plan-and-shop-smart.aspx).

Get kids involved

Planning, shopping, prepping, cooking, setting the table: there's a job (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Chores-and-Responsibility.aspx) for every age. Little ones might like folding napkins, arranging fruit slices on a plate or helping you hunt down ingredients at the store. Older kids can plan full meals and guide the rest of the team in bringing them to the table. (Bonus: kid power makes the work lighter for you!)

Plan ahead

Pick a time each week to talk about what you'd like to eat next. Consider putting a chalk or dry-erase board up so everyone can see what's on the menu. Effective meal planning (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/meal-planning-hacks-busy-families/>) also means having at least one "oops" meal you can pull together in minutes when schedules get especially hectic (think holidays and back-to-school).

Turn screens off

Before you sit down together, put phones and tablets in another room and shut off TVs everywhere in the house. This cuts back on the temptation to check alerts or dash off to continue the video game that started right before dinner. You can make this a priority in your Family Media Plan (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx).

Create calm

Once everyone is settled, take a few deep breaths together. This simple step tells the body and mind that it's time to relax and enjoy the moment. It aids healthy digestion, (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33076360/>) too.

Let there be silliness

Kids look forward to family meals when they're authentically fun, so try to keep things loose. It's fine to talk about nutrition or what happened at school or work, but avoid long lectures or pop quizzes. Kids will feel best if the learning happens organically. Jokes and laughter can foster a relaxation response (<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/using-laughter-to-reduce-stress-20101110780>) that helps us feel good and absorb the nutrients in our food.

Explore cultural & family roots

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This can lead to stories about how you ate when you were a kid. Did you love a particular dish your parents or grandparents made? Were some of those meals less healthy, based on the way they were prepared back then? Share ideas for retooling recipes (https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/prevention/pdf/postcurriculum_session3.pdf) so you can enjoy them even more.

Stay true to your plan

Try to gather for family meals even when one or more family members can't make it. Smaller groups at the table can be just as rewarding, and kids can help arrange plates for others to enjoy when they get home.

Focus on love & listening

Ask open-ended questions (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/healthy-mental-and-emotional-development-in-children-key-building-blocks.aspx>) and actively listen to show interest in your kids' lives. Give the floor (mostly) to them so you can find out what they're thinking.

Handling differences in a friendly way creates a safety zone where no topic is taboo. If an argument breaks out, you might say, "I hear both sides of this, but let's come back to it after dinner so we can really enjoy our time together." (Always follow through so kids realize that pausing a conversation doesn't mean avoiding it.)

The takeaway on family meals

Shared family meals are healthy for the body and mind. Everyone in the family benefits, including the grownups! And it's easier than you think. Even 3 meals together each week can make a real difference.

Remember that meals can be simple—and everyone can help. This makes family mealtime a great learning experience, too.

Children who eat with their families will build healthy habits that can last a lifetime.

More information

(</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cooking-With-Your-Children.aspx>)

- (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cooking-With-Your-Children.aspx>)
- (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cooking-With-Your-Children.aspx>) 5 Reasons to Cook With Your Kids (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cooking-With-Your-Children.aspx>)
- Breakfast for Learning: Why Your Child's Morning Meal Matters (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Breakfast-for-Learning.aspx>)
- Meal Planning Hacks for Busy Families (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/meal-planning-hacks-busy-families/>)
- Games & Activities to Encourage Healthy Eating (<https://www.myplate.gov/life-stages/kids>)
- How to Balance Kid Sports & Family Dinner (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/how-to-balance-kid-sports-and-family-dinner/>)

About Dr Muth



Natalie Muth MD, MPH, RDN, FAAP, FACSM, is a lead author of the AAP clinical report, "The Role of the Pediatrician in the Promotion of Healthy, Active Living." As a pediatrician and registered dietitian, Dr. Muth founded and directs the WELL healthy living clinic at Children's Primary Care Medical Group in San Diego and is co-author of the AAP-published resource The Clinician's Guide to Pediatric Nutrition. An adjunct professor at the UCLA School of Public Health, Dr. Muth a national spokesperson for the AAP and an award-winning author of parenting books The Family Fit Plan (<https://www.aap.org/Family-Fit-Plan-Paperback>) and The Picky Eater Project (<https://www.aap.org/The-Picky-Eater-Project-Paperback>), available in paperback and e-book form through the AAP Bookstore (<https://www.aap.org/en/shopaap/shop-by-product/books/>).

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