

*Parenting Tools:*

**- Family Dinner -**



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## **Parenting Tools: *Family Dinner***

Most American families are starved for time to spend together, and dinner may be the only time of the day when we can reconnect, leaving behind our individual pursuits like playing video games, emailing, and doing homework. Dinner is a time to relax, recharge, laugh, tell stories, catch up on the day's ups and downs, and develop a sense of family identity.

Research has confirmed what parents have known for a long time: sharing a family meal is good for the spirit, the brain, and the health of all family members. Recent studies link regular family dinners with many behaviors that parents pray for: lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and depression, as well as higher grade-point averages and self-esteem. Studies also indicate that dinner conversation is a stronger vocabulary-booster than reading, and the stories told around the kitchen table help our children build resilience. The icing on the cake is that regular family meals also lower the rates of obesity and eating disorders in children and adolescents. What else can families do to foster strong bonds in addition to family dinners? Consider some other family-building activities that take about 1 hour per day and present some of the same benefits as eating dinner together.

### **Strategies for families with younger kids**

- Make clear that “meal sitting” is different from “school sitting.” So, for example, everyone might wear PJs, or you might play music during the meal. Make dinner fun!
- Make dinner last longer. Give your kids ice pops made with fresh juice after they've eaten their meals. This will allow for more time for everyone to be together during dinner.

- Let your child help. Invite your child to stir a pot, crumble the cheese, set the timer, or choose a menu from two choices offered. Having a hand in making the meal creates pride of ownership, and that may make you child stay at the table longer.

- Avoid having a revolving door at the dinner table. If your child wants to leave the table, allow this only once or twice. After two departures, the child should know that dinnertime is over. This is different from forcing a child to sit, but takes away any positive reinforcement derived from leaving the table.

- Present each part of the meal as a course. For example, you might present veggies as an appetizer, pasta with pesto sauce as the main course, and orange slices for dessert. Maybe your child can help clear and bring on each course so that you are harnessing a child's activity in the service of the meal. For example, you might ask, "While you're up, would you get the water pitcher?"

### Strategies for families with preteens/teens

- Agree that dinner will be off limits for discussing conflicts. Don't talk about homework, whose turn it is to take out the trash, a recent D on a math quiz, or how late the curfew should be on Friday night.

- Offer to make a new meal based on your child's interests. If your son is studying South African history or Indian literature, search for recipes from that country.

- Invite your child to make a course or part of the meal. Direct your child to make something fairly simple (but special and dramatic) that will elicit oohs and ahhs from the rest of the family. Popovers, banana flambé, and fruit smoothies all do the trick.

- Create a weekly dinner ritual when your kids' friends are invited to dinner or to dessert. For example, on a tired Sunday night, friends could be invited to come over and make sundaes.

- Ask your teen to choose music for you to listen to during dinner. This will also give you something to talk about that is likely of great interest to your child.

Having dinner together gives you another opportunity to talk with your children and grow as a family.