

# The Benefits of Eating Together

## *The Family Who Eats Together Stays Together*

-- By Becky Hand, Licensed & Registered Dietician

"Come and get it!" It may be dinnertime, but when was the last time your family sat down and enjoyed dinner *together*? With music lessons, ball practice, play rehearsal, and work schedules, it can be tough. Rounding up the troop for an evening meal can be almost impossible! However, research is beginning to show that eating as a family has great benefits for your children and teenagers. Here are 8 more reasons why you should try to sit down together 5-6 times a week, whether for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

### **Reason #1: Communication and Well-Being**

Conversations during the meal provide opportunities for the family to bond, plan, connect, and learn from one another. It's a chance to share information and news of the day, as well as give extra attention to your children and teens. Family meals foster warmth, security and love, as well as feelings of belonging. It can be a unifying experience for all.

### **Reason #2: Model Manners (and more)**

Family mealtime is the perfect opportunity to display appropriate table manners, meal etiquette, and social skills. Keep the mood light, relaxed, and loving. Try not to instruct or criticize—lead by example.

### **Reason # 3: Expand Their World...One Food at a Time**

Encourage your children to try new foods, without forcing, coercing, or bribing. Introduce a new food along with some of the stand-by favorites. Remember that it can take 8-10 exposures to a new food before it is accepted, so be patient. Trying a new food is like starting a new hobby. It expands your child's knowledge, experience, and skill.

- Include foods from other cultures and countries.
- Select a new vegetable from a local farmer's market.
- Have your child select a new recipe from a cookbook, web site, newspaper, magazine or check out the recipes on SparkPeople.

### **Reason #4: Nourish**

Meals prepared and eaten at home are usually more nutritious and healthy. They contain more fruits, vegetables, and dairy products along with additional nutrients such as fiber, calcium, vitamins A and C, and folate. Home cooked meals are usually not fried or highly salted, plus soda and sweetened beverage consumption is usually lower at the dinner table.

### **Reason #5: Become Self-Sufficient**

Children today are missing out on the importance of knowing how to plan and prepare meals. Basic cooking, baking, and food preparation are necessities for being self-sufficient. Involve your family in menu planning, grocery shopping, and food preparation. Preschoolers can tear lettuce, cut bananas, and set the table. Older children can pour milk, peel vegetables, and mix batter. Teenagers can dice, chop, bake, and grill. Working as a team puts the meal on the table faster, as well as makes everyone more responsible and accepting of the outcome. Improved eating habits come with "ownership" of a meal.

#### **Reason #6: Prevent Destructive Behaviors**

Research shows that frequent family dinners (five or more a week), are associated with lower rates of smoking, drinking, and illegal drug use in pre-teens and teenagers when compared to families that eat together two or fewer times per week. Even as older children's schedules get more complicated, it is important to make an effort to eat meals together. Scheduling is a must.

#### **Reason #7: Improve Grades**

Children do better in school when they eat more meals with their parents and family. Teenagers who eat dinner four or more times per week with their families have higher academic performance compared with teenagers who eat with their families two or fewer times per week.

#### **Reason # 8: Save Money**

Meals purchased away from home cost two to four times more than meals prepared at home. At present time the restaurant industry's share of the total food dollar is more than 46%. Due to scheduling, commitments, and activities, families eat out several times each week.

It is time to bring the "family" back to the dinner table. Sharing dinner together gives everyone a sense of identity. It can help ease day-to-day conflicts, as well as establish traditions and memories that can last a lifetime.

## **The 5 Benefits -- and a Few Risks -- of Eating Together at the Dinner Table**

by [www.SixWise.com](http://www.SixWise.com)

Life has a way of pulling families in a million different directions all at the same time. While you are trying to get home from work at a reasonable hour, your spouse may be running all over town doing errands, and meanwhile your kids are tied up with activities of their own. All of this scrambling makes something that, in theory at least, should be simple sound like a

monumental feat.

What we are referring to is sitting down, as a family, to have dinner together most nights of the week. It may take some finagling, some rearranging of schedules and some tenacity on everyone's part, but those who have made the effort and succeeded have found that the rewards made it well worth their while.

Interestingly enough, while it seems that hardly anyone has taken the time to eat dinner as a family since the 1950s, the number of U.S. families who do eat dinner together is actually increasing (reversing a decades-long downward trend).

In fact, in 2005, 58 percent of kids aged 12 to 17 reported that they ate dinner with their families at least five times a week, compared to only 47 percent in 1998, a survey by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found.

What benefits are these frequent family-meal-attendees reaping? Let us count the ways ...

### **1. Better Nutrition**

Numerous studies have overwhelmingly pointed to the fact that families who eat together have better overall nutrition. In turn, this means they also have a lower risk of many diseases and of being overweight or obese.

One such study, conducted by Harvard researchers and published in the Archives of Family Medicine, found that families who reported eating together "every day" or "almost every day" took in more healthy nutrients, such as:



"Families that do have dinner together often are families whose parents are fully engaged with their kids. We're certainly not back to 'Leave It to Beaver' and 'Father Knows Best,' but it's heading in that direction," said Richard D. Mulieri, a spokesman for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

- Calcium
- Fiber
- Iron
- Vitamins B6 and B12
- Vitamins C and E

... than families who said they "never" or "only sometimes" ate meals together.

Another study by the University of Minnesota found that children whose families ate meals together often consumed more fruits and vegetables and fewer snack foods than those who did not.

## **2. Kids do Better in School, Less Likely to Take Drugs**

Not only have studies found that kids who eat with their families get better grades in school and have a more positive attitude about their future, but they also are less likely to get involved with negative behaviors like drinking alcohol, taking drugs or smoking.

The Columbia University study found that teens who only eat dinner with their families twice a week or less are:

- 3 times as likely to try marijuana
- 2.5 times more likely to smoke cigarettes
- 1.5 times as likely to try alcohol

... compared to teens who eat five or more family dinners a week.

## **3. Automatic "Check-In" Time**

Perhaps the noticed benefits that kids display from eating family dinners comes from the fact that it gives parents a set time every night to "check-in" with their kids.

"People are really starting to understand that this is an important thing," said Richard D. Mulieri, a spokesman for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. "Families that do have dinner together often are families whose parents are fully engaged with their kids ..."

People who do eat dinner together regularly often say that being able to talk and find out about each other's days is the best part. Sitting down together at the dinner table -- sans TV, phones calls or other distractions -- is the perfect opportunity to discuss what's going on in your lives.

#### **4. Help Your Kids Develop Language Skills**

When it comes to family events, family dinners were the most important one in contributing to children's language development, according to a Harvard University study.

"When there is more than one adult at the table, it tends to make talk richer, topics are established by adult interest and can be extremely valuable opportunities for children to learn," said Dr. Catherine Snow, professor of education at Harvard and the lead researcher of the study.

#### **5. Spend Time Together as a Family**

Looking back on their childhoods, many parents will recall their nightly dinner hour, when everyone was expected to sit down at the table. Many will also recall these times as some of their most cherished memories. Establishing this routine with your own family will give you time to bond as a family now, and memories to fondly look back on later.

#### **What About the Risks?**

Believe it or not, there are some risks to eating together as a family. In order to be successful, family dinners must be enjoyable -- for you, for your spouse, for your kids. If everyone is tense, irritable or unhappy, there won't be a lot of conversation, bonding or other benefits.



Kids who eat dinner with their families regularly are less depressed, less likely to take drugs and alcohol and get better grades in school.

So, in order to ensure that family dinners are beneficial, be careful of what you speak of.

"It's not the time to talk about cleaning their room or curfews," says Susan Moores, a registered dietitian. "Instead focus on open-ended questions about things your kids are interested in or things that will get them talking."

Also, stay away from the "clean your plate" mentality. Allow kids to serve themselves and just take a little bit. Forcing a child to eat everything on his plate will teach him to ignore his body's cues that he's full.

Finally, remember that it's OK (and probably necessary) to keep things simple. Have grilled or baked chicken with a salad, or throw meat and veggies in a crock-pot in the morning for a warm meal after work. You can also try meals that your kids can help prepare, like turkey burgers or individual pizzas they top themselves. Remember also that you can still sit down for a family meal even on those nights when you do order pizza or other take-out food.

The bottom line is, do what works for you -- whether that's cooking extra meals on the weekend to serve during the week, preparing meals in the morning or eating simpler meals, like sandwiches and soup, sometimes -- so that you're able to sit down and enjoy the meal too.

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# Eating Together as a Family

May 2nd, 2007 by [Sara Noel](#)

We're one of those families that eat together. \*gasp\* The television is off. In fact, we don't have a television anywhere near the dining room table. I'm flexible about many things, but I'm fanatical about us sitting and eating together. I understand busy schedules prevent many families from eating meals together every day. It's important to simply try to eat together whenever it's possible.

## **Creative Togetherness**

I prefer our meals to be at the dining room table with all family members present, but let's face it, that's not realistic every single day. As an example, some evenings my husband has evening classes. To bring order to this change in our routine, I have named those days "Crazy Days". On Crazy Thursday we all still sit at the table minus dad, but we have less formal dinners. We might have leftovers, sandwiches, or breakfast for dinner on that evening. The point is one less family member is not going to impact the togetherness of those members that are still home.

Another example, when schedules are tight or we're just plain tired, I'm flexible on making a home cooked meal. We'll opt for a picnic at the park versus a meal at home in order to be together. Location isn't as important as the time spent together. Simply make the most of the opportunities that you do have. If you can't be together at dinner, why not try breakfast? Even an evening snack together is an opportunity to be together. Don't lose these moments to connect.

## **Staying Connected**

Our meal times together are when we discuss our days. Sometimes our children don't have much to share, but we try to motivate them to share any tidbit. One way of encouraging them to talk is by playing "High and Low". We ask them the best part of their day and the worst part of their day. This is never the time for heavy topics or family meetings. As parents, we have so few times to connect with our children in a fun and positive way. This is one way we carve out the time.

Consistent and positive moments together lead to lasting trust and to strengthening the family. It provides a safe haven of comfort for children. They learn that this is a time they can share and have the full attention from their parents. It's being available to our children and to our spouse. It's family unity and is sadly becoming a lost ritual.

Our children are young, but we've already been able to weave in many important discussions such as bullying, friendships, peer pressure, and manners without it seeming like a lecture. In my opinion, as a parent and wife, it's one way that I can show how much I care.

Ok. Maybe my kids will be chess champs and not sports stars because I opt to insist on this time together over shuttling them to other activities at the dinner hour, but somehow I think it'll all work out fine with "Team Noel". It's my sacred time and I'm not giving it up. The chicken might be dry, but my family will know I value spending time with them.

Eating together matters. Each person receives the message YOU are important. YOU belong. YOU are valued. YOU are loved. It should be a priority.

Is it for you?

If interested in exploring more on the topic of eating together and communication, I recommend reading "The Surprising Power of Family Meals: How Eating Together Makes Us Smarter, Stronger, Healthier and Happier" by Miriam Weinstein (Steer Forth Press, 2005), "201 Questions to Ask Your Kids" by Pepper Schwartz (Collins, 2000), "Table Topics Conversation Cards-Family Edition" by Table Topics, and "Food for Talk: Bringing Families Together One Conversation at a Time" by Julianne Smith (Running Press, 2006)

As seen in Midland Daily News

*Bookmark to:*



1. on 03 May 2007 at 12:31 am [2Aheek](#)

Eating together was a hard and fast rule in my family. I have many fond memories of discussions and lively arguments we had over the dinner table. I think that most families could eat together...but it's just not a priority for many people. I hope families start to slow down and take time for what really matters - spending time with each other and building memories and values that will last a lifetime. Much more important, in my opinion, than having a zillion activities that fill every last moment of spare time.

2. on 03 May 2007 at 10:09 am [3Sara Noel](#)

Thanks Robyn, It's not always smooth sailing at the table. My kids are 7, 4, and 13 mos old. 😊 I do feel table talk is important though and I can see how it has helped keep us all connected.

Aheek, I agree that many parents are able to, but just don't. It all goes by quickly and when I think back to how many of my good memories were with family at the table, it's profound really.

3. *on 03 May 2007 at 8:18 pm* [4emily\\_hope](#)

My family eats together, also. We don't make it every night as every one has different schedules, especially now that my two DDs have jobs. It is one of my most favorite times of the day. When I was growing up, we always ate at the dinner table.

4. *on 16 May 2007 at 10:52 am* [5Amy](#)

I always ate meals at the table as a kid... sometimes they were pleasant, sometimes not... but we were required to be there. My DH rarely ate with his family, and even more rarely at a table together— kids and parents always ate separately. We've talked about these differences a lot and what they say about our families.

5. *on 20 May 2007 at 4:35 pm* [6Gary LaPointe](#)

The TV should be off when people are eating meals. That makes me cRaZy. (Unless of course you're eating alone.)

It's so distracting, when I eat out I try to sit so I can't see a TV, it just keeps catching my eye, even stuff I can't stand, it just keeps distracting me.

I don't think we ever had TV on (while eating) when I was little, but I know at some point when I got older, game shows would be on the TV, but I don't remember if that was when I was 15, 20 or 25...

6. *on 13 Jun 2007 at 11:41 pm* [7Kali](#)

For the first eighteen years of my life, me and my four other family members always had dinner together with no TV. I'm glad my mother instilled that value in us. I am passing it onto my daughter and I cherish that 30 minutes everyday...until she's eighteen of course...



**Alexandra Blumencranz, CP**  
Certified Parent Coach

## *The Importance of Eating Together as a Family*

Who remembers when eating dinner together meant a civilized meal around the table with thoughtful conversation and a well-deserved break from a busy day? Even if it was later in the evening because of hectic schedules, dinner was a chance to be together and catch up on the family's news. For most of us, however, the idea of sitting down as a family for ANY meal seems like an impossibility because of the myriad of activities and priorities that have crept into our everyday lives.

These days, families rush through life because of work schedules, school schedules and after-school activities. If the family does happen to be home at the same time, invariably the TV takes precedence over thoughtful conversation, serving a few purposes... "entertaining" the kids so that they eat what's in front of them, allowing the parents to catch up on current events and giving everyone a few minutes of quiet time before the chaos ensues again.

Another popular scenario is that the kids eat first and are then sent off so that the adults can eat together later. What ever happened to eating as a family? To sharing with everyone how the day went? To coming together as a unit instead of just on Holidays? How old do the kids have to be for this to actually become a reality? The answer is that even with an infant, meals can become a special family time every day that allows all members to regroup and strengthen the shared bond. If these values are instilled from the beginning and the parents understand the importance of this time together, the family meal will become a reality that continues as the children grow through not only early years but the teenage years and beyond.

So why do we want to strive for a family dinner? First and foremost, this time gives everyone a chance to share about their day. Parents need to stay involved in their children's lives and this gives a great opportunity for questions and answers. Secondly, children need role models to look up to; parents can discuss their day, the importance of hard work, and model good manners and eating habits as well. We all know how kids emulate their parents' every move! Also, children need to feel that they are part of the household. By giving equal voice and importance to their feelings and activities, children know that they have a place in the family too.

Creating this family meal together takes a little effort and persistence, but once this time becomes a priority, families will begin to reap the benefits and enjoy their special time together. Use the following suggestions to get started...

- First, discuss ahead of time with other adults in the household what this time should look like. Having everyone on the same page will help during the transition until the new routine is learned. Also, keep in mind that if someone is coming home just before dinner, they might need 15 minutes or so to change their clothes and catch their breath, for example. Take all of this into account so that the meal will be pleasant and enjoyable.

- Give toddlers a job that will become their special “chore.” This could be putting out the placemats, napkins, wheeling the highchair over for baby, mixing the mashed potatoes etc. Get everyone involved – this isn’t a restaurant!
- If the kids go to the supermarket with you, talk about the meal that you are planning and ask them to help put the ingredients in the cart.
- Turn off the TV during meal time so that there are no distractions. This will probably need some transition time especially if it was part of the child’s everyday routine. Keep in mind that children need to be taught appropriate behavior at the table by modeling the adults. Just because they are older doesn’t mean that they will suddenly develop manners!
- Go around the table and give every person the “stage” to share whatever they want to about their day. It’s suggested to share both the good AND bad; this habit will help later on as the children deal with more difficult issues and feel comfortable sharing with their parents.
- Be flexible. If dinner together really isn’t a possibility for whatever reason, maybe breakfast or lunch is a better option. If the kids really need to eat at a separate time from the adults, at least sit with them while they eat. The importance of the meal is the time together, not the food on the plate.
- If there is an infant or small child in the family, pull the high chair to the table and place a few snacks such as cereal or fruit on the tray so they can be part of the family meal too, even if it isn’t really their time to eat. Babies benefit from adult stimulation and conversation – they might even have something to contribute!

Starting good habits early that include daily family time around the table will benefit each member and allow the family bond to grow and flourish. Even if it’s only a few times a week, eating together instills important values that the children will treasure. If a new baby brings many changes to a household, adapt and incorporate these new changes into the established family values and beliefs. Families will be able to build on what’s important – even when life gets a little hectic.

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## **Working Together in BC to Promote Eating Together**

[Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research, Summer 2007](#)

Eating together is a deeply held value across income levels and cultures. This article focuses on the action we are taking to promote eating together among British Columbians, and describes our experiences using open space technology.

People seem to know instinctively that eating together is a good thing good for health, for communication and for social bonding. As a recent guest on an open-line radio show, callers reinforced this message; men and women, young and old, new immigrants and Canadians hailing from all around the world called to talk about how important eating together was for them.