

Make Family Meals Your Tradition

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These tough times are leading us back to basics. That can be a good thing when one of the basics we are embracing is having more meals together as a family.

The influence of family matters a great deal when it comes to being healthy and physically fit. Ask a teenage girl why she drinks milk, and she will probably tell you it is because her mother does. Discuss a high schooler's exercise routine, and he may share that his entire family is active and plays sports together. Our level of wellness is greatly influenced by our families.

Tradition says families eat together, but in reality, often that is not true. Trying to get everyone together for a meal can be difficult. But the benefits of eating together make family mealtime a tradition worth pursuing. When families make the effort to schedule meals at times most or all family members can be present, they reap a number of benefits. According to *Say "YES" to Family Meals*, an Iowa State University Extension publication, the first of those benefits is.....

- **Better Communication.** When everyone sits down together once a day, you can keep up-to-date about what is going on with school, jobs, activity schedules, and friends.
- **Stronger Family Bond.** Shared meals give family members the feeling of belonging. Family mealtime is a chance for everyone to be together on a regular basis. Family routines or traditions contribute to one's sense of security. In these uncertain times, coming together as a family is something we can count on and gain strength from.
- **Shared Learning.** Family mealtimes can be a great arena for teaching social skills, manners, family values, a sense of community, as well as basic nutrition and food preparation ----- but keep it fun!
- **Improved Nutrition at Reduced Cost.** Families are more likely to eat a nutritious meal when most or all of the family eats together. Shared meals usually save money, also.

So how do we get our families back to the table? First, make family mealtime a priority! Emphasize the importance of mealtime and encourage everyone to eat together. Choose specific family mealtimes and write them on the calendar. Eating together as often as you can is a simple, enjoyable way to let family members know that they are valued. When you are too busy for a family meal, you may be TOO busy. It may be time to reassess your priorities! Okay, sometimes it may seem impossible to gather the whole family together. Instead, consider the possibility of two or three family members eating meals together, gathering to talk, and maybe even going for a walk or some other favorite activity.

Remember parents, the children will follow your lead---if you don't emphasize the importance of family meals and time spent together as a family they won't either. But if you make a special effort to have regular, pleasant family meals, it will become an important part of your children's family memories and something they will pass on to their children.

Be creative and flexible about when and where to eat. Family meals can be shared at home, at a restaurant, in a park, or near the playing field. Explore ways individual schedules can be adjusted. Make the most of each opportunity instead of worrying about following a strict timetable. Simply eat with your children whenever possible, even if it isn't every day.

Make mealtime fun for everyone. Eating flavorful, healthful food is one of life's greatest pleasures, especially when shared with family and friends! Keep conversation light and pleasant. Encourage all family members to share ideas and daily news. Practice actively listening to each other. Focus on the positive; save the lectures for another time.

Involve everyone. Encourage all family members to consider mealtime as a team effort--from preparation through clean-up. Preparing and cooking food together can be fun and creative. Family meals are not a spectator sport. Make it a team effort --add music and even some dancing or air guitar.

Eliminate interruptions and distractions. Turn off the television and radio. When the phone rings, take a number and return calls after the meal or let the answering machine pick up. Shared positive meals are a time to take a deep breath, enjoy each other's company, strengthen relationships, and nourish our bodies and souls.

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