

Always eat family meals - no matter what!

- **Family meals are more nutritious.** A Harvard study found that families who eat together are twice as likely to eat their five servings of fruits and vegetables a day as families who don't eat together. Families also consume less fried food and soda pop when they eat together. Finally, children who regularly eat with family have diets higher in fiber, calcium, iron, foliate and vitamins B6, B12, C and E.
- **Kids who eat family meals tend to eat a wider variety of foods.** When kids eat a wide variety of food they get more of the varied vitamins and minerals they need, and they become less picky eaters.
- **Home meals don't necessarily mean healthy meals.** When children eat at home but not with family, they typically do not consume a very well balanced diet.
- **Kids are never too young for family meals.** Even babies nursing or on formula benefit from being included at mealtime. Pull up the baby swing or infant seat and allow babies to be a part of the meal. Now is the time to establish the routine of family meals, so your child will come to depend on eating meals with the family as an important part of their day.
- **Kids are never too old for family meals.** A 1997 American Psychological Association (APA) study showed that well-adjusted teens (those with fewer drug and alcohol problems, better relationships with their parents, higher academic motivation and less depression) ate dinner with their families at least five days a week.
- **Family meals offer a chance for parents to be a role model.** During family meals, parents can set a good example of healthy eating that children may model. They also display and impart polite table manners. Family meals teach your child these important skills.
- **Kids learn more about nutrition and healthy eating.** In multiple studies of school-aged children, those who ate family meals had a higher level of nutrition knowledge.
- **Kids learn about food safety.** Children who eat with families learn about food safety like hand washing before eating.
- **Family meals help prevent obesity.** Children who have company at meals are slimmer than those who eat alone. That's because they eat less, eat more slowly, and talk more. What a good reason to have a family meal with lots of lively conversation!
- **Family meals build vocabulary.** In at least one study, kids who ate with their families performed better in school and had a broader vocabulary. Family meals offer an opportunity for conversations where kids learn vocabulary-building words to help them read and communicate better.
- **Children gain a better sense of belonging within the family.** Family meals offer a time for a family to come together as a group and develop a feeling of belonging. That sense of belonging leads to better self-esteem.

NOW, when your children are young, is a good time to make family meals together important and enjoyable.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Keep mealtime positive.
- Reserve discipline for another time.
- Focus on each other and not the food.
- Allow children to eat until they are full without forcing "one more bite" or a clean plate.
- Don't forget to make mealtime fun. Laugh together and share funny stories from your day.

10 Tips for Organizing Family Dinners

Don't let this mission feel daunting! Even the simplest meals -- like order-in pizza -- qualify as family dinners. The goal is to get everyone to the dinner table and to spend quality time together - not to force Mom into June Cleaver or Carol Brady mode. Here are tips on pulling it off:

- Set a goal. Twice a week, perhaps? Build from there.
- Keep it simple. Family meals don't have to be elaborate. Work salads and vegetables into meals. Focus on familiar favorites, like chili or frittatas.
- Be prepared. Keep ingredients for healthful meals on hand, including plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Keep healthy 'appetizers' on hand. Stock the kitchen with fresh fruits, nuts, and low-fat cheese -- food the kids can snack on after school, instead of chips.
- Get the family involved. Let kids help prepare meals and set the table.
- Use the crock pot. Put everything together before leaving for work in the morning. You'll come home to the delicious smell of a cooked meal.
- Pick up take-out, order pizza, or eat out. It still counts as quality time spent together.
- Avoid portion distortion. Keep serving sizes under control, whether you're at home or eating out.
- Make it enjoyable. Leave the serious discussions for another time. Family meals are for nourishment, comfort, and support.
- Set the mood. Play soothing music. Put flowers on the table. Light a candle. Create a relaxing environment.

Here's another hint -- no TV allowed, no phones answered! This is time for listening to each other, sharing the day's stories, and nurturing the family connection.