

Raising Healthy Children: The Importance of Family Meals¹

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Whether it is breakfast, lunch, or dinner, family meals provide an opportunity for family members to spend time enjoying good food and each other's company. For many families, mealtime may be the only time when they have a chance to come together as a unit and share quality time. Eating meals together provides a great opportunity to create and strengthen family bonds as everyone shares stories about their days, plans for the next few days, or simply engages family members. This publication highlights the benefits of family meals and provides strategies to help families increase the number of meals they eat together.



Figure 1. Credits: Fuse

Why Should Families Eat Together?

One of the major barriers to having family meals is difficulty scheduling a time that everyone can be present. School, work schedules, and extracurricular activities can make it difficult for families to find time to eat together. Even if every family member is not available for every meal, families should strive to eat together as often as possible. Eating meals as a family has been associated with healthful dietary patterns (Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan & Story, 2007). For example, in a study done in 2007, families who ate dinner together every day consumed an average of 0.8 more servings of fruits and vegetables compared to families who did not eat dinner together (Rockett, 2007). These families also had higher intakes of important nutrients such as dietary fiber, calcium, folate, vitamins B₆, B₁₂, C and E, and iron, and they were less likely to eat unhealthy fried foods and drink soda (Rockett, 2007).

Family meals also provide an opportunity for family members to come together and strengthen ties. Eating meals with family members can be a time for togetherness and socialization with the family.

Children from families who eat together on a regular basis are more likely to have family support, positive peer influences, and positive adult role models (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer & Story, 2006). Family meals provide an environment that encourages communication between the

1. This document is FCS8925, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date: June 2010. Latest revision: July 2013. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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child and caregiver. Building strong family relationships and ties among family members allows children to trust and depend on their caregivers for support. Researchers have shown that family connectedness is associated with a lower chance of engaging in high-risk behaviors such as substance use and violence, and fewer psychological problems, including emotional distress in children (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story & Bearinger, 2004; Fulkerson et al., 2006).

Researchers also found that the frequency of family dinner increases characteristics such as having a positive view of one's future, being motivated and engaged in school, being committed to learning, and having positive values and positive identity (Fulkerson et al., 2006). Families who had five to seven family dinners per week were three times more likely to report having family support, positive family communication, and parental involvement in schools (Fulkerson et al., 2006). Thus, eating family meals is associated with improvement in the nutritional quality of the diet, as well as improvements in children's overall well-being.



Figure 2. Credits: iStockphoto

Tips for Making and Eating More Meals Together

The following are tips on ways to involve family members, including children, in making and eating more family meals together:

- **Make family meals a priority in your household.** Focus on the importance of being together as a family more than on making an elaborate meal.

- **Start with small steps.** Increase the number of family meals by one extra meal a week. Small steps can lead to large rewards.
- **As a family, plan a menu for the week and make a grocery list.** Using weekly grocery store ads to design meals for the week and clipping appropriate coupons are great ways to work together to keep costs down.
- **Let children gather food needed for making the meal from the cabinets, pantry, or the refrigerator.**
- **Let children mix foods together or stir food in a pot with appropriate supervision.** If the oven is needed, kids can set the temperature or prepare a salad.
- **Ask your child to help set the table.**
- **Work as a family to clean up after dinner, making it fun!**
- **Select family-friendly recipes that give everyone an important task to do.** This will teach children about the importance of family togetherness and team work, which helps the job get done faster.
- **Design conversation cards.** These cards can be used to start conversations at the dinner table just in case there is quiet time.
- **Turn off the TV!** Instead, use the time to talk about each other's day.



Figure 3. Credits: Wavebreak Media

For More Information

To get more information about family meals, contact one of the following reliable sources in your county:

- UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book).

UF/IFAS Extension offices are listed at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>.

- WIC nutritionist at your county health department (also in the blue pages of your telephone book).
- For referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area you can call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850)386-8850 or check the yellow pages of your phone book.

Recommended Websites

Family Day - A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children is a national movement to inform parents about the importance of family dinners in their children's lives. The website offers tools caregivers can use to raise children in a drug-free environment, and a family dinner kit. <http://casafamilyday.org/familyday/>

Healthy Eating is a website that contains a database of recipes, with a specific category for kid-friendly recipes. The website also contains healthy meal planning resources that offer nutritional information for meals and a daily meal planner. <http://www.healthyeating.org/Healthy-Eating/Meals-Recipes.aspx>

The Power of Family Meals offers thousands of recipes for families. The website also offers information on why mealtime matters and its implications on children. Once families sign up for free they have access to "My Recipe Box" where they can collect recipes found on the website. <http://www.poweroffamilymeals.com/default.aspx>

Recipes and Tips for Healthy, Thrifty Meals is a publication from the USDA's Center for Nutrition and Policy Promotion. It contains ideas for meal planning, cooking tips, food lists, recipes, and menus that are nutrition and fun for all members of your family. <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/publications/foodplans/miscpubs/foodplansrecipe-book.pdf>

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