



July 2018

FC/Family/2018-01pr

Benefits of Family Mealtime

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Introduction

Statistics indicate that family mealtime is declining. In 1997 16% of families ate a meal together zero to three nights per week, in 2013 this number rose to 21% (Saad, 2013). These statistics indicate that there are many families who could benefit from having family mealtime. Research indicates that having dinner with your family on a regular basis can have positive developmental outcomes for youth and adolescents (Lyttle & Bough). Children in families who eat together three times per week or less, may be missing out on some major developmental and protective factors.

Benefits of Family Mealtime

Communication Skills

Having uninterrupted conversations at the dinner table can expand children's vocabulary and reading abilities regardless of the family's socioeconomic status (University of Florida). "Family meals... [provide] a daily opportunity for... siblings to speak to an infant or toddler, and help them learn words, understand language and build conversation" (Brotherson, 2009).

Nutrition

Children, ranging in ages from 9 to 14, who have regular dinners with their family have healthier dietary patterns, eat more fruits and vegetables, less trans-fat and fried food, and more vitamins (Gillman, Rifas-Shiman, Frazer, et al., 2000).

Adolescents from families who eat five or more meals together in a week also have a much lower likelihood of acquiring an eating disorder of any kind (American College of Pediatricians, 2014).

Emotional

"Mealtime conversation brings the family together and promotes positive self-esteem in children" (Bligh, Garen, & Rosales, 2017). Having consistent family meals provides structure for children allowing them to feel more safe and secure within the family unit. Having meals together is a time when children can see how parents interact with each other, solve problems, express emotions, and communicate with their spouse. When this interaction is positive, it models healthy relationships and helps children develop these skills. (American College of Pediatricians, 2014.)

Healthy Behaviors

Regular family mealtime can decrease the likelihood that children will use marijuana, alcohol, tobacco, and nicotine; their access to prescription drugs and the probability that they will have friends who use drugs may also decrease. Children may be less likely to engage in sexual activity, develop an eating disorder, experience depression, and have a teen pregnancy. (The Nation Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2010.)

Creating a Mealtime Habit

Implementing regular family mealtimes may be difficult with expanding job responsibilities, busy family schedules, and other numerous time restraints. There are many effective strategies that can help create a habit of eating family meals together in order to reap the above mentioned benefits.

- Plan ahead
- Choose a regular time

- Involve all family members in preparation and cleanup
- Turn off the TV
- Leave electronic devices turned off or in another room
- Eat around a table
- Keep the conversation pleasant
- Be flexible
- Try family mealtime for breakfast or lunch
- Avoid arguing and discipline
- Create an atmosphere of happiness and togetherness
- Don't force children to eat new foods or to finish what is on their plate
- Do what works best for your individual family

(Fishel, 2017; Penkalaski, 2014; Brotherson, 2009; University of Florida)

Conclusion

If eating meals together is new for your family, set a realistic goal that all family members agree on. Start small by eating one or two meals together per week, and then work up to at least four or five meals together each week. "Sharing a family meal provides an experience that touches all of our senses - sight, touch, taste, smell, and listening to warm laughter or good conversation" (Brotherson, 2009). Working together as a family can help establish a regular family mealtime habit and potential positive benefits and outcomes.

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