

The Value of Family Meals

by Katrina Walton

Citing research from respected publications such as *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Journal of the American Pediatric Association*, and *The Journal of Nutrition Education*, and universities such as Harvard, Emory, and George Washington, Miriam Weinstein, in *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*, concludes that “family meals provide the most consistent protective factor—the family unit—against stress and adversity.”

Having meals together helps strengthen family relationships because children have the opportunity to learn more about their family’s history and are encouraged to remain connected to their extended family, ethnic heritage, and community of faith. Children not only learn life skills of responsibility and team work, especially when invited to help with meal preparation and clean-up, but family meals provide an appropriate setting to learn manners.

Furthermore, family meals help with children’s academic achievement. Through conversations at the table, children’s language is helped more than playing with or reading to them. Being with family also encourages children to think critically and helps them feel as though they have some control over their environment. Family meals predict a child’s behavior even more than church attendance or school grades. While family meals are correlated to a child’s reading readiness and linked to positive outcomes such as emotional stability, academic success, psychological adjustment, higher self-esteem and higher family functioning, they are also strongly related to lower incidence of negative outcomes such as low GPAs, depression, suicide, and teenage alcohol and drug use.

What constitutes a family meal? No one can say precisely, due to the complexities of modern life. The important thing is that families have social time together five to six times per week, face to-face, with at least one parent.

Family meals are a solid check-in time when children can count on seeing their parents and vice versa; a time when memories are made. Do not worry, however, if you cannot always achieve this because, “Children who share a few dinners weekly do better than those who have none at all.” Parents should not underestimate their influence. Their children close contact and time to talk whether they are toddlers or teenagers.

How to start?

- If you cannot do dinners, try breakfasts, late night snacks, Saturday brunches, etc.
- Recall your own family meals as a child and think about their influence on you.
- Think: “Supper is about prevention and repair.”
- Let your children try things 15-20 times before they say they don’t eat that food. Studies have shown that children try new things when they take pleasure in being together, not by the food type; e.g., families who eat hot foods enjoy them because it is social/ cultural, and a “taste for it” is developed over time.
- Encourage parents, teachers, legislators, coaches, and religious leaders to foster a balance between homework, family time, unscheduled activities, and outside enrichment activities.

- Allow for “down time” for the family to be together and make time for conversation. Make life “supper friendly” by cutting back on extra curricular activities and reducing “time wasters.”
- Give children an opportunity to participate in cooking and preparing for holidays.
- Remember that food is about nourishment of all kinds

Bon appetite!

Katrina Walton was a Parent Educator at Birth To Three when this article was written.