

Children who have regular family dinners are more likely to be emotionally content



Some families establish a set dinner time each night

Plan meals ahead of time to avoid the fast food hunger rush



The Family Table

It's not about fancy dishes and elaborate meals. It's about connecting and communicating with your Sugar Land family.

Written by Julie Battelle

S If the kitchen is the heart of the home, then food is the love it gives. It's a great feeling to walk through the door after a long, dull day and get hit with the warm, comforting aroma of pot roast in the crock pot or sizzling chicken bathed in garlic and butter bubbling in a skillet.

A "good" family has become synonymous with an antiqued illustration of Mom, Dad, Big Brother and Little Sis all gathered around the dinner table. But life is rarely picture perfect and today's successful family is the one that finds a way to get brother to basketball practice before sister has to be picked up from piano, while Dad hits the gym and Mom barely makes it on time for her book club meeting. With weeknight commitments from scout meetings and soccer practice to homework and violin lessons vying for our evening hours, trying to get everyone in the same place at the same time for a meal can fall pretty low on the list of family priorities.

Eating Meals as a Family

But consider the findings of the EAT (Eating Among Teens) project, which found that kids who reported eating dinner together more than three times a week had less substance use and significantly better academic and mental health than those eating fewer meals with family. These kids also reported feeling more "connected" to their family. This suggests that eating meals as a family has benefits for young people above and beyond their general sense of connection to family members, and that these benefits may apply to a broad range of health domains. So it's more than just a meal, it's an investment in the future of your family.

Leslie Kaemmerling, a Sugar Land wife and mom of three, says it's very important to get her family together for dinner. Kaemmerling says, "My mom always had a meal ready for us at home, and we always sat around talking about our day. I want the same for my kids. Sometimes extra-curricular



Children enjoy being part of meal preparation



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Great Ideas

from Sugar Land Parents for Successful Family Dinners

“I give my children four nickels at the beginning of dinner. I explain that these are four tokens they can earn to go to Chuck E. Cheese’s on the weekend if they got through dinner with appropriate manners. If they earn enough tokens from good table maeners during the week, we take them to Chuck E. Cheese’s.” - *Tamorra Goodmanson, Mother of 2*

“We go around the table and say our ‘high and low’ for the day. With four children, it gives everyone their own time for the spotlight.” - *Ann Velasco, Mother of 7*

“Have a weekly meal menu ready so you don’t get stressed out at the last minute about what to cook today. Rushing to the grocery store to get the ingredients at the last minute adds more stress.” - *Jasmin Chen, Mother of 2*

“We do theme dinners sometimes. For example, an all-orange dinner (sweet potato fries, mandarin oranges, grilled chicken sandwiches with cheddar) or an all green dinner (spinach gnocci, asparagus, pistachio pudding.)” - *Becky Morales, Mother of 3*

activities can get in the way, but I limit those to one activity per child at a time, and they are usually doing them together. We'll change the plan to eat early together if we know someone has something that evening."

Accommodating Everyone

While mom and dad may have sophisticated (and accommodating) palates, most kids could be satisfied with, and may even insist on, chicken fingers, hot dogs, or macaroni and cheese every night. So how do you satisfy the parents and still serve something the little ones will eat—and will be good for them?

"I usually have a good idea of what I will serve for dinner every night," says Francine Burke, Sugar Land mom to 4-year-old triplet girls. "My girls like a lot of the stuff that isn't all that healthy: fish sticks, hot dogs, pizza." But Burke uses tricks to work a little good green stuff into their diet. "They like soup, which is a quick and easy meal - I even drain the broth and there are lots of veggies in it. They'll also eat carrots, corn and "green fries" (string beans)." Books such as the popular "Deceptively Delicious" by Jessica Seinfeld offer further help on how to disguise extra "good stuff" in traditional recipes including ideas such as putting cauliflower in macaroni and cheese and spinach in brownies.

Dinner at Home without the Cooking

Even if you can't make every meal a Martha Stewart moment, you can make every gathering meaningful by adding little touches. When life is too busy to make time for cooking anything at all, try stopping at the deli for a ready-made chicken, a bag of frozen green beans and baguette from the bakery. Even the dreaded drive through can make for a meaningful meal together—ditch the paper sacks and put those Big Macs on ceramic plates, pour the sodas into nice glasses, and use placemats. When it comes to dinner time, try to leave behind the stress of putting together the perfect meal, and instead focus on enjoying the time spent together. SLM

JULIE BATTELLE, a Sugar Land native, is a freelance writer and single mom extraordinaire to her awesome daughters, Bailey and Allie.

10 Long Term Benefits of Family Dinners

Studies show that children and teens who have frequent family dinners....

- 1 Get better grades in school.
- 2 Are more likely to be emotionally content and have positive peer relationships.
- 3 Have lower levels of tension and stress at home.
- 4 Are more likely to say their parents are proud of them.
- 5 Have healthier eating habits.
- 6 Are more likely to confide in their parents.
- 7 Are half as likely to abuse substances.
- 8 Are less likely to use illicit drugs or have friends who use drugs.
- 9 Are less likely to try marijuana or have friends who use marijuana.
- 10 Are at lower risk for suicide.

Source: Adapted from a study done by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA)

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Dinner Time Conversation Tips

Here are some ideas to turn meal time into meaningful time.

- Give everyone a chance to listen and talk; no one person should dominate the conversation.
- Establish some family rituals and take turns blowing out the dinner candles or saying the blessing.
- Let young children know expected behavior before sitting down to dinner.
- Try to make the dinner table a pleasant place for the family to gather.
- Discuss current events with older children, ask their opinions, and share your own.
- Set rules that home phones, cell phones, and blackberries are off limits.
- Don't force a child to clean his plate. Instead encourage him to 'try' everything and make it a fun game.
- Break out a board game or cards as soon as everyone helps clear the table to keep the family fun going.
- Reinforce positive dinner behavior. When your child does well at the table, tell her how proud you are.

-Katrina Katsarelis

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