

## Family Mealtime

**Do you ever wish your family could slow down long enough to all be at home at the same time? Why not organize a family mealtime into your routine?**

**The idea of gathering the family together in the same place at the same time in the 21st century may seem impossible for many, but it can be done. Eating together as a family these days may not look like Sunday dinners of a generation ago. However, the goal can still be the same. Family mealtime provides an opportunity to spend time with family members and talk with one another. Eating meals together can help families feel closer and provide better nutrition. Two ingredients for happy, healthy families.**

**Family members today often have varied schedules which can make it challenging to eat dinner together. Family mealtimes do not need to be evening meals. Perhaps your family is more likely to be together at lunch or even breakfast.**

**Families who spend mealtimes together reap numerous benefits. Family members tend to eat better if they are gathered together, which can generally be attributed to improved meal planning. In addition, eating together offers:**

***Time to be together*** Families today come in a variety of forms: two-parent, single-parent, step families, grandparents raising grandchildren, and families where the parents are cohabiting. In the majority of families today, the parents work outside the home. Additionally, many teens have jobs after school. It is difficult for families to find time to spend together, and family mealtime is a perfect opportunity to draw the family together. Everyone needs to eat!

**In healthy families, family members have opportunities to assert their individuality as well as to be together and connected to the family. Spending time together helps a family build closeness and a sense of belonging to a special group.**

***A chance to talk to one another*** Have you ever felt that the communication in your family consists of "hello," "goodbye," and notes to one another? This happens a great deal in families today with busy work and activity schedules. Family mealtime can provide an opportunity for all family members to be together and share what is happening. Use family mealtime as a chance to have pleasant conversation. Save those tough conversations for another time. Have a rule that if disagreement starts during a family meal, the family members will set aside another time to deal with the issue.

***A time to build family traditions*** Rituals and traditions are an important part of building a strong healthy family. Mealtime can be an opportunity to develop family traditions. Some families have Spaghetti night or some other favorite dish on a specific day. Others have Eat for yourself night where the family eats leftovers and snacks, but the family eats together. Traditions need not be elaborate to have meaning for family members. Rituals and traditions help the family know that they belong to a special caring group.

***A way to learn about your heritage*** Every family develops patterns of how they operate as a family group. These patterns are passed down from generation to generation. They are based on our culture and what we value. Knowing about our heritage helps us to understand our family. Our culture and ethnic background also contributes to the uniqueness of our family. Family mealtime can provide a setting for teaching your children about their heritage.

One mother shared her experiences of family dinners from her youth. Her father always put on a suit jacket for dinner. In her strict British family, formality at dinnertime was expected. You may discover that a favorite recipe that has been handed down through the generations in your family is related to your ethnic background.

***A time for parents to model good habits*** Parents are the first teachers of children. Children learn a great deal from their parents about social manners, how to communicate and healthy eating habits. Family mealtime can be an opportunity for parents to model appropriate table manners, healthy food choices and good listening skills. Children get the opportunity to practice these skills, which will be important throughout their lives