

Making Mealtime a Family Matter

Family mealtime appears to be in jeopardy. The days of families gathering nightly around a hot, well-balanced nourishing meal with Mom presiding as chief cook (and bottle washer) are only faint memories to many of us. The current trend of grabbing fast food at the local drive-through does not have to be the norm in busy, working households; it can be the exception. How to reverse this national trend in your household? Make mealtime with your family a priority - even if it's only a few days each week.

Easy to say, you may argue, but how to make it happen? Try engaging all family members in food decisions. Consider these ideas:

Ask everyone to choose a favorite meal. Did you ever notice that we all love our own ideas? Capitalize on this concept. Enlist all members old enough to make basic decisions to provide input into what recipes are chosen and who takes responsibility for helping to prepare a meal. As the organizer, try to balance family choices throughout the week to insure variety. For example schedule the "Spaghetti and Meatball" meal a day or two from the "Stuffed Shells". Round out main menu choices with vegetables, salads, fruit and/or dairy to insure that a wide variety of nutrients are included.

Plan menus together. Scour the supermarket flyers for specials, ask the kids to pick out recipes from your home files; shop together when possible. The more engaged children are in the decision-making process, the more skills or assets you help them to build and the more likely the meals will be consumed - even enjoyed!

Make healthy meals quick and easy too. Try a Slow cooker. Your tasty, one-dish meal will be ready when you all come home from work and school. Seek out quick and easy recipes for weekday meals. Try Internet sites like the "Cook It Quick" web site from the University of Nebraska Extension (www.ianr.unl.edu/ianr/lanco/family/cick.htm). A little planning can make meals come together with little effort.

Match the cooking task with each child's age and skill level. Remember that children learn by doing. Preschoolers are often able to: stir with a spoon, mash soft fruits and vegetables and pour dry ingredients into a bowl; early elementary aged youth can also measure basic ingredients, pour liquids from wide-mouth containers and combine wet and dry ingredients; while older children can use hand mixers, vegetable peelers, chop vegetables and use microwave ovens, with supervision.

Teach food safety as you cook. To keep foods safe from bacterial contamination, practice four simple steps from the USDA "Fight Bac" campaign:



Clean - Wash hands and surfaces often

Chill - Refrigerate food promptly

Cook - foods to proper temperatures using a food thermometer



Separate - Don't cross contaminate

Remember, if you model safe food handling behaviors children will do the same.

Remember the Division of Responsibility. Parents and caregivers are responsible for offering nutritious, age-appropriate foods; children decide what and how much they will eat. Sound shocking? Remember back when you were young and engaged in a battle with an adult about "finishing every morsel" on the plate? Remember how you vowed to never again eat that hated food item? Children today are no different; force the issue and you all lose.

Create a dining atmosphere. Who says that candles, tablecloths and even centerpieces should only appear on special occasions or during holiday celebrations? Ask the children to help set the table and decide on a tablecloth, candles, etc. The transformation in mealtime behavior when you create a dining "atmosphere" can be amazing. Children generally sit still longer; conversations actually occur and some even linger over the end of a meal. Is this behavior worth the extra trouble? You decide.

Clean up together. "Many hands make light work." You also receive the added bonus of additional conversations with family members. This value alone can be priceless.

So what does all this shared decision-making, cooking, talking, laughing, learning, sharing together accomplish? Perhaps a happier, healthier household is in the mix? You may find yourself actually looking forward to making a meal at home - even after the busiest workday.

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