

FAMILY MATTERS

...because family does matter

Generously share this newsletter with families and friends who matter most to you!
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FAMILY MEAL TIME IS ABOUT ALL KINDS OF NOURISHMENT

DO YOU KNOW THAT SHARING EVERYDAY FAMILY MEALS

- Lowers the incidence of teenage drug and alcohol use, smoking and teen pregnancy
- Discourages obesity and eating disorders
- Provides emotional stability and reduces stress
- Helps maintain connection to extended family, ethnic heritage and religious community
- Increases resilience in children and families to the curves and detours life throws our way
- Better prepares kindergarteners to learn to read
- Keeps us better nourished
- Anchors children more firmly in the world
- Teaches manners
- Helps cement family relationships

DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR CHILDHOOD FAMILY DINNERS? What were those times like? What made them good? Was it the food, the people, the conversation, the atmosphere? What 'ingredients' do you bring to your family table today?



In France and Italy the evening meal is a cherished event. Yet, this simple family tradition, once part of our daily lives in the US, is in serious danger of extinction. Likewise in danger, are the things we do while having our meals - talking, sharing our day, at work, at home and in school! Family mealtime has so much potential. We owe it to ourselves and the ones we love to do what we can to bring this back and off the endangered species list.

WHAT WE HAVE LOST

Our lives have become segmented. Family members are coming and going. Parents often arrive home late from work or meetings. Children may have multiple extracurricular activities in addition to homework. Family members can end up dispersed – text messaging, surfing the internet, IMing, or playing video games. These attractions and distractions are increasing along with our rapidly paced lives. Even when the family does eat together, the TV might be on or someone is talking on the phone. These new normal interferences have eroded and undermined the positive intentions of our once sacred tradition. Disconnection has replaced the connection that comes from shared meals by creating the propensity for less togetherness and isolation. If we don't intentionally reclaim this time, the momentum of our lives will undoubtedly take over.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HEALTHY EATING?

Healthy eating is almost a thing of the past. Fast food, take out, and micro-waved prepared meals have become the norm. In some cases all day grazing has replaced the full meal. Many of us have unknowingly acquired dysfunctional eating patterns and preferences. As adults, we may not be sure what it means to eat a balanced meal. While many factors contribute to obesity and eating disorders, we cannot overlook the fact that children learn from what we do which includes our attitudes toward food and eating.

WHERE WE EAT

Is family dinner a time when your children can count on seeing you? In addition, when children help in meal preparation, they have the opportunity to learn real-life skills, assume responsibility, and become better team members. I often hear parents say, “My kids prefer to eat in front of the TV or in their room.” This behavior can be habit forming and tough to change. As these children get older, they can become resistant to coming to the table. However, this doesn’t mean that your teenager has no need for his family. Don’t undervalue yourselves by concluding your teen doesn’t seem to want to spend time with you. Take steps to prevent this from happening. Turn things around. Spending an hour around the dinner table just talking with your children is time well spent!



RESEARCH

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) is mandated to find ways to keep kids from destructive behaviors. Since 1996 they have done yearly surveys interviewing parents and children, including diverse backgrounds and variables. CASA found that eating regular family dinners headed the list of factors that were within parental control. They also found a correlation between the amount of family meals eaten together and kids’ destructive behaviors. The kids who ate regular family meals showed fewer signs of destructive behavior than those who ate few or no family meals together. In addition, kids who had regular family meals were half as likely to be highly stressed as those who rarely had dinner together.

**“Making family meals a priority, in spite of scheduling difficulties, emerged as the most consistent protective factor of disordered eating.”
Journal of Adolescent Health**

Karen Cullen at the Children’s Nutrition Research Center at Baylor University found that “...people who watch television while eating tend to tune out their natural hunger and satiety cues, which encourages overeating.” University of Minnesota researcher, Diane Neumark-Sztainer states that restoring family meals can help teenage girls avoid dangerous eating disorders. Nearly 18% of girls who ate one to two family meals each week showed signs of eating disorder behaviors; 9% when they ate together three to four times a week. The risk lowered when there were five family dinners a week.

THE MEAL TIME CONVERSATION

Have you ever noticed that much of our daily chatter is reporting in, checking up and doling out instructions? If your dinner conversation is primarily focused on the “to do’s”, harping on behavior, delving into charged issues or arguing, you might want to rethink how you spend this

precious time. Make the conversation a mix of housekeeping details as well as a discussion of plans, big topic questions about events, magic moment learning experiences and verbal games. Encourage talk about extended family, share stories from your own childhood and help your kids talk about their day. Relaxed and pleasurable mealtime conversation makes it desirable as well.

Dinnertime with young children can be hectic. Use environmental adaptations, such as sensible seating placement, expecting children to stay at the table a *little longer*, and supporting each child to practice listening as well as having a chance to speak. Remember you are a model for them. This is part of the bit-by-bit process of teaching table politeness. Provide meals that make it worthwhile to come to the table. If your children are very hungry before dinnertime, give them a small portion of the meal as an appetizer, or something nutritious, to help hold them until the meal is ready. Understanding that children can be picky eaters, it is still important that they children try new foods. Try to expand their dining horizons by serving food that the entire family will enjoy. Don't get stuck in the habit of preparing multiple dinners.

Professor William Doherty, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota and author of *The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties*, states the value of dinner table conversation, "This is where a family builds its identity and culture. Legends are passed down, jokes rendered, eventually the wider world examined through the lens of a family's values. In addition, younger kids pick up vocabulary and a sense of how conversation is structured. They hear how a problem is solved, learn to listen to other people's concerns and respect their tastes."

Additional mealtime tips:

- **Have meals at a regular time, when possible**
- **Clear the table from its other functions for the meal**
- **Sit down together, facing one another, even if everyone cannot be present**
- **Make meals a 'digital free' zone except for true emergencies**
- **Make atmosphere and tone pleasant. Foster time to talk and listen; no correcting, reprimands or power struggles**
- **Model healthy eating. Serve a variety of foods, without demonizing any items.**

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Miriam Weinstein author, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals* states, "Sitting down to a meal... encloses us and, for a brief time, strengthens the bonds that connect us with the other members of our self-defined clan, shutting out the rest of the world." Having family dinners together is not only good for us; it makes us feel good too! Find your way to make family meals part of your family's ritual.

Would Parent Coaching strengthen your family bonds?

Please call 914-941-8179 or email GoodOmin@NecessaryChoices.com

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The choices we make define the lives we live!



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