

Family mealtimes are being talked about quite often, from the popular press to research arenas. And all this attention is well-deserved; there are many reasons for having family meals. Children benefit by learning social skills including how to interact with others. Children are more likely to develop healthy eating habits by being a part of family meals. Family members benefit through spending time and building family traditions together, sharing conversation, and demonstrating care and interest in each other. Family meals also contribute to providing structure which helps children feel safe and secure.

What about teens and mealtime?

Meal time is beneficial as a regular time to check in with teens, making it easier to spot a problem before it gets out of hand – whether it's through conversation or noticing changes in your teen's behavior. Regular, healthy meals can also help to manage teens' stress. In today's busy world, the family meal may be one of the few times the family can relax and be together to share what's happening in daily life.

Family mealtime is a positive thing

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University has conducted national surveys on family dinners since 1999. CASA compares teens who have frequent family dinners (five to seven per week) to teens who have infrequent family dinners (less than three per week). Compared to teens who have frequent family dinners, those who have infrequent family dinners are:

- Twice as likely to use tobacco.
- Nearly twice as likely to use alcohol.
- One and a half times more likely to use marijuana.

CASA focused on dinner time which may be the easiest time of day for many families to eat together.

The College of Education
& Human Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



Other studies have looked at the benefits of family meals regardless of time of day. Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), a research study at the University of Minnesota, found that both parents and teens viewed family meals positively including seeing it as a positive atmosphere, an enjoyable time together, and as an occasion to talk and connect. Results from Project EAT also suggested that having regular family meals, regardless of time of day, can have long lasting benefits in preventing teen substance use.

Relationships are what it's all about

What is most important about family mealtime is the conversations that can happen and connections that can be made. Typically teens are spending less time with family and more time with peers, so family mealtime is a natural time to be together. Although it may be easier to establish family meals when children are younger, parents of teens should not give up on the idea if they have not had family meals in the past. The good news in the CASA survey was that among teens who reported infrequent dinners, 60 percent said they would like to have dinner with parents more often.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
EXTENSION

In a survey with teens and parents, CASA also explored what happens in the parent-teen relationship during family dinners. Teens who had frequent family dinners were more likely to report that they talked to their parents about day-to-day experiences compared to those teens who had infrequent family dinners. In addition,

- 75% of teens said they talk to their parents about what's going on in their lives at dinner.
- 79% of parents agreed that by having dinner together they learned more about what was going on in their teens' lives.

What gets in the way of family meals?

Hectic lives can get in the way of having frequent family dinners. The CASA survey identified "too busy or different activities" and "at work or late shifts" as the two major reasons families did not have frequent family dinners. In addition not knowing what to serve can also be a barrier. Family members may feel they do not have the skills to prepare a healthy meal and may rely on takeout, convenience foods, or snack items.

How to start having family meals

Kathleen Ferrigno, CASA's director of marketing has advice for parents, "The message for parents couldn't be any clearer. With the recent rise in the number of Americans age 12 and older who are using drugs, it is more important than ever to sit down to dinner and engage your children in conversation about their lives, their friends, school – just talk. Ask questions and really listen to their answers. The magic that happens over family dinners isn't about the food on the table, but the communication and conversation around it."

If families have not typically had family meals together, here are some suggestions to get started:

- Start with a goal of one or two meals together per week with the goal of working toward more frequent family meals.
- Ask other family members to help with grocery shopping or food preparation.
- Choose a time when all or most family members can be present.

- Enlist support for having family meals from other adults in the home, so everyone is on the same page.
- Turn off the television; mealtime is a time to talk with one another.
- Turn off cell phones; discourage all family members from texting or answering phone calls.
- Make the time together pleasant. Encourage each family member to talk about his or her day. Mealtime is not the time for discipline.
- Don't be discouraged if family members are not receptive at first; keep trying.

Where you can go for more information:

The Importance of Family Mealtimes – University of Minnesota Extension

www.extension.umn.edu/parenting/components/mealtime.html

Nutrition, Food & Health – University of Minnesota Extension

www.extension.umn.edu/Health/

Project EAT: Resources – University of Minnesota School of Public Health

www.sph.umn.edu/epi/research/eat/resources.asp

Eat.Talk.Connect! in Dakota County (Minnesota)

www.co.dakota.mn.us/ (search for "ETC")

Family Day – National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse

<http://casafamilyday.org/familyday/>

Kansas State University Meal Time Family Time

www.he.k-state.edu/fmp/displays/mealtime.html

You may also want to look at:

Fredericks, L. (1999). *Cooking time is family time: Cooking together, eating together, and spending time together*. New York: William Morrow.

Weinstein, M. (2005). *The surprising power of family meals: How eating together makes us smarter, stronger, healthier, and happier*. Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press.