Structure (Importance of Family Mealtime)
Partnering for School Success: Take and Teach Lesson 8

Notes to facilitator

Introduction
This is one of nine Take and Teach lessons designed to encourage parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Each lesson is based on University of Minnesota Extension’s Parenting for School Success booklet, which should be used as a companion resource.

It’s recommended that you offer this lesson only after you have taught “Lesson 1: Parents Make a Difference,” which provides an overview of factors and parental roles in aiding children’s school success, as well as learning in the wider world.

Lesson goal
The primary goal of “Lesson 8: Structure (Importance of Family Mealtime)” is to provide information about the integral role family mealtime plays in establishing structure at home – structure that, in turn, supports children’s learning and success in school. Remember a key objective of all lessons – to persuade parents to be more intentional about helping their children learn in school, at home, and in the community.

Lesson objectives
Participants will:

• Understand the role of family mealtime in establishing structure and routine to help children feel secure so they learn better.
• Understand how family mealtime and mealtime conversation contribute to children’s language development and ability to learn.
• Set a goal related to family mealtime and identify at least one strategy to help meet that goal.

Suggested scripts
Suggested scripts for facilitators are indented and printed in the “Lesson Plan” in sans serif typeface. Here’s an example:

You all have said you either want to start eating meals together as a family, or if you already eat some meals together –you want to do this more often. What are reasons you don’t eat more meals together now? What are some barriers to family mealtimes at your house?

Time
Allow 60 minutes for the lesson.
Handouts for participants
Each participant should receive one copy of the following:

- “Enjoying the Family Meal” handout: USDA Nibbles for Nutrition newsletter – Download from USDA website and make copies:
  https://www.foodhero.org/sites/default/files/resources/enjoying.pdf (Handout also in Moodle course)
- “Family Meals – FAST, Healthful” handout: USDA Nibbles for Nutrition newsletter – Download from USDA website and make copies:
- Parenting for School Success booklet (already received)

Materials

- “Survey Topic Map” (for facilitator use only) – Document included
- Flipchart and markers
- Pens or pencils – Provide one for each participant.
- Note cards – Provide one for each participant.
Lesson Plan

Note: Suggested scripts are indented and in sans serif type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning activities</th>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome and introduction</td>
<td>• “Survey Topic Map” (for facilitator use only)</td>
<td>10 min</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Parenting for School Success booklet</td>
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Briefly review the last session you conducted for participants and ask how they fared completing any tasks they were assigned. For example, if participants previously attended Lesson 1, ask them how things are going on the action steps they set to support their children's learning in school and at home. Discuss briefly.

Respond to any questions participants might have about what they have learned to date.

Begin the content portion of the lesson. Say:

Remember filling out the survey in Lesson 1? Many of you indicated on that survey that you wanted to learn more about the importance of family mealtime in establishing structure at home, in order to support children’s learning and school success. So, let's talk about the importance of eating meals regularly as a family.

Take out your Parenting for School Success booklet and turn to the section on structure on pages 4-5. Note the statement at the top of page 5: “Children learn better when parents provide a regular routine.” Also note the references to providing nutritious meals and eating together regularly.

We’re all busy. It can be hard to eat meals regularly as a family. But it’s important to do so as much as possible – to give family mealtime priority in your life. Why? Because experts have found that regular family mealtimes support children’s learning and success in school in two big ways:

- Structure and routine (like regular family meals) help children feel secure so they learn better. Children will not learn as well in an unstable home environment because worry about what might happen next undermines their ability to concentrate and learn.
- Besides providing structure, family mealtime and mealtime conversation contribute to children’s language development and ability to learn.
Allow a couple minutes for questions, and then move on to Learning activity #1.

### Learning activity #1: General benefits of family meals in providing structure and supporting learning

Lead a discussion about the “general” benefits of family meals in providing structure and supporting learning. (Learning activity #2 will address the specific benefits of mealtime conversations.) Start by posing the following question:

**Why is it good to eat meals together?**

Listen to responses and record on a flipchart. Make the following points if parents do not bring them up, or use these points to guide the discussion:

Eating meals together enables *children* to learn the following:

- Interact with others. Children learn to get along with adults and other children (their siblings) by being together at mealtime.
- Good manners. Mealtime is a great time to practice saying “please” and “thank you” – and to practice listening to others.
- Following parents’ good example. As a parent, grandparent, or caregiver, you are a role model. Children learn by watching you.

Eating meals together enables *parents and other caregivers* to:

- Provide structure for children. This creates a safe environment where they can learn. Children feel more secure with routine; this includes offering meals and snacks at times they can count on.
- Encourage conversations that help children learn language skills and thus do better in school. Casual conversations are just as important as reading to children in order to help them acquire language skills.

Eating meals together enables *families* to:

- Simply be together. Because of busy lives, mealtime

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Optional:
- Flipchart
- Markers

| 10 min |
may offer one of the few times all family members can be together.

- Build traditions. Mealtimes are often the center of holidays and celebrations, but holding regular family meals also helps to build a tradition in itself.

Transition to the next activity by saying:

Now let’s look more closely at the benefits of mealtime conversation.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Learning activity #2: Benefits of mealtime conversation</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask parents to brainstorm on questions or topics they could bring up at family meals that are related to school and their child’s development. Write responses on a flipchart, and comment as needed. Close the discussion by saying:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remember to ask your children “open-ended” questions about school in order to encourage conversation. Open-ended questions require more than a “yes, no” or other one-word answer like “fine.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>For example, asking “How was school today?” doesn’t require a detailed response. A child could just say, “fine” or “OK” in response. Instead, ask more specific questions, such as:</td>
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| - What happened during the skit in social studies today?  
- What were some of the questions on your English quiz? Describe them to me. |

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<tr>
<th><strong>Learning activity #3: Generating ideas for starting or increasing regular family meals</strong></th>
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<td>Lead a discussion about starting or increasing regular family meals. Say the following:</td>
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<td>You all have said you either want to start eating meals together as a family, or if you already eat some meals together –you want to do this more often. What are reasons you don’t eat more meals together now? What are some barriers to family mealtimes at your house?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen to responses and write them on a flipchart. Next, lead a discussion by posing the following questions:</td>
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|  |
|---|---|
| **• Flipchart** | **5 min** |
| **• Markers** | **15 min** |
- How do you think you can overcome these barriers?
- What are some ideas for starting, or doing more, family mealtimes in your family?

Listen to responses and write them on a flipchart. Offer or expand on the following ideas, depending on whether parents mention them or not:

- Pick a time when most family members will be home for family meals. Hold family meals even if only two people can be there. Consider cooking special meals, with favorite foods, when everyone can be there to add an air of celebration.
- Try to eat at a table, rather than on trays or other makeshift arrangement. Choose a consistent place to eat meals in your home.
- Parents or other caregivers should agree on a plan for family mealtime before presenting it to children. It may take some time to instill new habits in children, or even adults, who may be used to watching TV while eating or “eating and running.”
- Most meals should contain healthy, favorite foods. Start by cooking favorite foods to get a routine going.
- Families with young children may find family mealtimes particularly stressful. Try to include at least one favorite food in meals to ease this stress a bit. Add new foods to the menu one at a time rather than all at once. It may take several times to try a new food before children accept it as part of the routine of family meals.
- Keep trying even if everyone isn’t enthused at first. It takes time and perseverance to establish habits.

**Learning activity #4: Overcoming barriers to family mealtime**

Distribute the “Enjoying the Family Meal” handout to each participant. Give participants a few minutes to look over the handout, and then say:

Do any of these ideas look helpful to you as ways to overcome barriers to family mealtime? Do you think you’d try any at home? Which ones?

Listen for a few responses, and then distribute the “Family Meals – FAST, Healthful” handout 

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FAST, Healthful” handout. Say:

This handout has some good timesaving tips for preparing easy, healthful family meals. Take a look and try some of these ideas at home.

**Homework assignment**

Pass out notecards and pens or pencils to participants and say:

Would you like your family to:
- Start eating meals together – if you rarely, or never, eat together now?
- Hold more family meals – if you sometimes eat together now?
- Make family meals more enjoyable?

Pick one goal and write it on your note card. Then think a few moments, and write down at least one idea to help you meet your goal. Plan to try that idea in the coming week.

**Closing**

Close by encouraging participants to put the notecard in a place at home where they will be reminded to work on their goal. If participants are returning for another lesson, say they will be asked to report how they did on their goal when you meet again. If participants are not returning, urge them to report their progress to someone in their life (spouse, friend, relative) as a way to hold themselves accountable.

Close by asking if anyone has questions, and then wish them luck in supporting their children’s success in school.