

# Pediatrician shares the benefits of family meals

June 17 2024, by Natalie D. Muth, MD, MPH, RDN, FAAP, FACSM,  
American Academy of Pediatrics

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Does it seem like the busier your family gets, the slimmer the chances are that you'll see each other at dinner—or any other meal, for that

matter?

If you answered yes, don't feel guilty. Life demands a lot of everyone, your [kids](#) included—and many families find it hard to block out time for shared meals. But here's something that might motivate you to change things up: Children who eat with their families at least three times a week enjoy hearty physical, emotional, social and academic perks.

Here are five reasons to carve out time for family meals:

- Introduce your kids to tasty, healthy foods. This boosts their intake of key nutrients while increasing the chances they'll pick similar foods when they're away from home.
- Fuel young brains and bodies. Kids grow and develop through puberty and beyond. Amazingly, the [human brain](#) doesn't reach full maturity until we hit our mid-20s. Good eating habits matter at every age and stage—which might be one reason family meals are linked with school success.
- Help everyone eat healthier and maintain a healthy weight. Families who eat together not only tend to eat more nutritious, balanced meals but they also find it easier to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. This benefits the whole family, including children, teens and adults who may have either a low or high body-mass index (BMI).
- Enhance mental health. Shared mealtimes give you the chance to talk and express love, concern and understanding for each other. Research links family meals with healthy mental development and lower risks for childhood depression, eating disorders, substance use and other [mental health](#) concerns.
- Model healthy habits. Kids who help prepare food at home can learn a lot about cooking, [meal planning](#) and the value of daily routines. Time at the table can also teach [communication skills](#)

and introduce good food as one of life's greatest pleasures.

You don't have to eat every meal together, and you don't even have to cook. Sandwiches and fruit or tasty leftovers from earlier in the week will do just fine. If weeknight dinners don't always work, try breakfast or brunch on the weekends to round out the plan.

There aren't any hard-and-fast rules, but do serve at least one vegetable or fruit every time (fresh, frozen or canned with no added sugar). Meal plans can include the same dishes each week if everyone likes them. Drop by [myplate.gov](http://myplate.gov) for inspiration, including tips for healthy, budget-friendly meals.

Planning, shopping, prepping, cooking, setting the table; there's a job for every age. Little ones might like folding napkins, arranging fruit slices on a plate or helping you hunt down ingredients at the store. Older kids can plan full meals and guide the rest of the team in bringing them to the table.

Pick a time each week to talk about what you'd like to eat next. Consider putting a chalk or dry-erase board up so everyone can see what's on the menu. Effective meal planning also means having at least one "oops" meal you can pull together in minutes when schedules get especially hectic (think holidays and back-to-school).

Before you sit down together, put phones and tablets in another room and shut off TVs everywhere in the house. This cuts back on the temptation to check alerts or dash off to continue the video game that started right before dinner. You can make this a priority in your Family Media Plan.

Once everyone is settled, take a few deep breaths together. This simple step tells the body and mind that it's time to relax and enjoy the moment.

It aids healthy digestion, too.

Kids look forward to family meals when they're authentically fun, so try to keep things loose. It's fine to talk about nutrition or what happened at school or work, but avoid long lectures or pop quizzes. Kids will feel best if the learning happens organically. Jokes and laughter can foster a relaxation response that helps us feel good and absorb the nutrients in our food.

This can lead to stories about how you ate when you were a kid. Did you love a particular dish your parents or grandparents made? Were some of those meals less healthy, based on the way they were prepared back then? Share ideas for retooling recipes so you can enjoy them even more.

Try to gather for [family meals](#) even when one or more family members can't make it. Smaller groups at the table can be just as rewarding, and kids can help arrange plates for others to enjoy when they get home.

Ask open-ended questions and actively listen to show interest in your kids' lives. Give the floor (mostly) to them so you can find out what they're thinking.

Handling differences in a friendly way creates a safety zone where no topic is taboo. If an argument breaks out, you might say, "I hear both sides of this, but let's come back to it after dinner so we can really enjoy our time together." Always follow through so kids realize that pausing a conversation doesn't mean avoiding it.

Remember that meals can be simple—and everyone can help. This makes family mealtime a great learning experience, too.

Children who eat with their families will build healthy habits that can

last a lifetime.

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