

FAMILY MEALS: LET'S BRING THEM BACK

We can't overstate the importance of screen-free family meals. Eating together and engaging in conversation builds strong family bonds. It's an opportunity to help kids get in the habit of reflecting on their day, sharing stories, telling jokes, and talking about what's going on in the world. It's often during family meal conversations that family stories and family history get passed down from generation to generation.

What the research says:

- Family meals can ensure healthier eating,ⁱ especially when they are screen-free.ⁱⁱ
- Eating together is linked to healthier behavior and closer child-parent bonds, particularly among adolescents.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The more family meals teenagers have, the less likely it is that they will engage in substance abuse and other anti-social behaviors.^{iv}
- The meals also contribute to a closer, more honest, and more authentic bond between parents and kids. Three out of four teenagers report that they talk to their parents about what's going on in their life during family meals.^v And eight out of ten parents report that they find out more about what's going on in their children's lives when they eat together.^{vi}

What you can do:

- It's easier to maintain family meals throughout adolescence when they are an enjoyable tradition early on. If, however, you've drifted away from family meals and want to embrace them again, try to plan ahead so that eating together is not overly stressful for anyone.
- For single parent families, or when two parents are in the workplace, meal preparation, and cleaning up afterwards, can feel burdensome. It makes a big difference if everyone—even the youngest members—has a role to play. Distribute tasks like meal preparation, serving, setting and clearing the table, and washing dishes among all members of the family. Or work together—it's more fun that way.
- Try to agree on the menu beforehand, so that there's no tension about likes and dislikes of the food being served.
- For many families these days, work and school schedules make it impossible to eat together every day. If you can only manage to do it one, two, or three nights per week, aim for the same day(s) of the week and at the same times. Creating a regular schedule will make it easier to turn family meals into a lasting tradition.
- And remember—concentrate on the food and each other. Avoid electronic distractions!

ⁱ Woodruff, S. J., et al. (2010). Healthy eating index-C is positively associated with family dinner frequency among students in grades 6-8 from Southern Ontario, Canada. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 64(5), pp. 454-460.

ⁱⁱ Fitzpatrick, E. et al., (2007). Positive effects of family dinner are undone by television viewing *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 107, pp. 666-671.

ⁱⁱⁱ Survey from the Center for Alcohol and Substance Abuse (2010). The Importance of Family Dinners IV. New York: Columbia University; Sen, B. (2010). The relationship between frequency of family dinner and adolescent problem behaviors after adjusting for other family characteristics. *Journal of Adolescence*, 33(1), pp. 187-196.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Sen, B. (2010). The relationship between frequency of family dinner and adolescent problem behaviors after adjusting for other family characteristics. *Journal of Adolescence*, 33(1), pp. 187-196.

^{vi} Ibid.

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