

# Everyone to the Table: Family Meals Serve Us Well

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## Facts of family meals

Recently, 40 percent of teens surveyed reported that they had meals with their family three to six times the previous week.<sup>1</sup> However, one-third of those surveyed reported eating with their family two or fewer times the previous week, with 14 percent eating no meals with family.<sup>1</sup> A 2007 study<sup>2</sup> revealed that only 65 percent of 15-year-olds in the United States reported eating the main meal of the day with their parents “several times per week” — one of the lowest levels of all wealthy countries surveyed.

## Why are family meals attracting so much attention in the media and from researchers?

Family meals have become an accepted indicator of the quality of family relationships.<sup>2</sup> As parents, educators, researchers, social service organizations and government programs search for answers about the well-being of the American family, it is apparent that family meals tell us a lot about how those families become and stay connected.

## Why eat together?

Regular family meals offer such benefits as optimal nutrition and positive family communication.<sup>3</sup> Despite all the directions families are pulled today, parents are still the biggest influence on the food and meal habits of their children.

Family meals provide a great amount of good, in a variety of ways, for the entire family. Very young children who share

family meals show improved literacy skills when compared with children who did not have family meal opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Children and adolescents who share meals with their parents have improved food habits — they tend to eat more fruits, vegetables and dairy foods, and less fried food and soft drinks at meals eaten with their families.<sup>5</sup> Older adults who share meals with family and friends benefit not only by eating better, but also from the increased socialization. Intergenerational family meals help preserve and pass along family culture, traditions and values.

How often a family eats dinner together is a powerful indicator of whether a teen is likely to smoke, drink or use drugs and whether the teen is likely to perform well academically.<sup>5</sup> Family meals help protect adolescents from developing disordered eating behaviors, according to a study done in 2004.<sup>6</sup> Another study<sup>7</sup> found that efforts to encourage and include adolescents in family meals and food preparation not only affect the child or teen as an individual, but also their interactions with family, school performance and relationships in the community and beyond. In other words, family meals help improve youths’ diet quality *and* their school and psychological performance.

Ellyn Satter, a child-feeding specialist, shares eight strengths of family meals <sup>8</sup>:

1. Meals support food regulation and appropriate growth.
2. They make you a family.
3. Meals support good parenting.
4. They provide children with social and emotional support.
5. They connect us to our history.
6. Meals reassure children they will be fed.
7. They teach children to behave well in polite company.
8. Meals teach children to like a variety of foods.

The power of family meals reaches even further, according to Satter. Her research shows that family meals can help solve childhood weight problems. How? By putting food, the feeding experience and family dynamics in a most positive perspective, family meals become strong building blocks in growing healthy, *competent eaters* – that is, eaters who trust their own abilities to make sure they get adequate amounts of enjoyable, nourishing food, and are positive and comfortable with eating.

### **Family meals can be flexible**

It is important to note that **family meals can include eating with anyone** you love, care for, live with or who cares about you. It is the feeling of sharing and support that comes from being together that makes family meals so valuable.

Family meals aren't necessarily limited to dinners — **consider family breakfasts** as possibilities for meals together. If time is an issue, set the alarm clock, and start the day on a positive note.

### **What gets in the way of family meals?**

There are many reasons for the shared meal disappearing from the family dinner table. One reason is *not* that children – even adolescents – are not interested, or parents either, for that matter. The most frequently given barrier for fewer family meals than desired was “schedule conflicts.”<sup>5</sup> Whether it comes down to parents' work or social schedules or kids' sport and activity schedules, it seems that there just is no *time* for family meals today. Other reasons might be:

- There is no time to cook or shop.
- Family members lack knowledge of parenting or cooking skills.
- It is just not pleasant.
- No one likes the same foods.

And if there *is* the time and will, is the meal:

- eaten in the car while hurrying to the next event?
- shared in front of the television or eaten with headphones on?
- a family priority?

### **Where can you begin?**

If family meals are not common for your family, it might seem difficult to know how to get started. Talk over your plan of action with other adults who feed your child, and then talk with your child. The next step? Act the plan! Meals don't need to be home-cooked masterpieces in order to serve the purpose. If you have a mental image of a Norman Rockwell-style holiday feast when you think of family meals, let that thought go! Instead, focus on familiar foods that fit the time, skills and favor of your family.

A “family meal mentality” probably won't happen overnight. Old habits can take a long time to change, and family meals will be

easier to accomplish if started when children are young. But even if children are older, the benefits of family meals are well worth the effort. The keys are *realistic expectations* and *consistency*.<sup>8</sup> Start from where you, and your family, are. Be flexible, and keep trying. Here are some tools to use:

- Turn off the television. Remember, it is not a member of the family. Let phone calls wait until later. Make sharing the meal the priority.
- Share the effort of putting a meal on the table. You will find the benefits are also shared!
- Avoid making too many rules for mealtime. Instead, try to model the actions and behavior you would like children to exhibit.
- Use “conversation starters,” if needed, to keep a discussion going. Other families may need to practice taking turns to let everyone have a chance to speak uninterrupted.
- Keep the meal pleasant. Try to make mealtimes together a positive time.

Consider Ellyn Satter’s “division of responsibility” in feeding<sup>8</sup> to keep family meals peaceful and positive:

- Parents are responsible for the *what*, *when* and *where* of feeding.
- Children are responsible for the *how much* and *whether* of eating.

There is no one single environment when it comes to family meals – and those numerous environments mean every family, every schedule, every mealtime is unique. But even though there may be barriers, it is possible to work through them and make successful family meals happen for you and your family.

## Evaluation Form

This survey is voluntary, but your answers are important to us. You do not have to answer every question, and you will not be identified with your answers in any way.

1. How do you rate this lesson?  
*Check one:* Excellent \_\_\_ Good \_\_\_  
Average \_\_\_ Poor \_\_\_ No opinion \_\_\_
2. Do you think this information will be useful to you in your own life?  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ If yes, how? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What did you learn that you did not know, or that was of interest to you?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Will you share this information with others? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
*If yes, check one:*  
Friend \_\_\_\_\_ Family \_\_\_\_\_  
Organization \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. After today, how important will family meals be to you? *Circle one:*  
Very important    Somewhat important  
Neither important nor unimportant  
Somewhat unimportant    Very unimportant
6. Before today, how important were family meals to you? *Circle one:*  
Very important    Somewhat important  
Neither important nor unimportant  
Somewhat unimportant    Very unimportant
7. Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_  
What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time!

**Leaders, please return surveys to:**  
Sandy Procter, PhD  
Kansas State University  
Department of Human Nutrition  
204 Justin Hall  
Manhattan, KS 66506

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### Author

Sandy Procter, PhD, RD, LD  
Specialist, Maternal and Child Nutrition  
Department of Human Nutrition, Kansas State University

### Reviewers

Mary L. Meck Higgins, PhD, RD, LD, CDE  
Professor and Specialist, Department of Human Nutrition Kansas State University  
Lisa Friesen, RD  
Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, Foods and Nutrition  
K-State Research and Extension-Sedgwick County

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