

Everyone to the Table: Family Meals Serve Us Well

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Feelings about family meals

If you are a “baby boomer” or older – born before 1964 – you may have clear memories of family meals. Even the phrase “family meal” may bring to mind images of special holiday feasts or comfort foods that fed the heart and soul as well as physical hunger. But times have changed. Family meals are no longer typical for most of us.

This lesson is designed to share the many benefits of family meals, and to offer suggestions and support for bringing the family meal back to the family.

Objectives

For learners, this lesson will:

- examine positive attributes of family meals identified through research.
- identify common factors that block family meals.
- offer skill-building techniques for creating family meal opportunities.

For leaders, this lesson also will:

- provide additional information for family meal education.
- connect family meal education with social cognitive theory of health education.

Key points of this lesson

1. Family meals offer insights into family relationships.
2. Family meals provide lasting support for children of all ages.
3. Family meals support good nutrition and positive parenting.

Suggested program preparation

1. Review this leader’s guide and the fact sheet *Everyone to the Table: Family Meals Serve Us Well*, MF-2784. Have a copy of the fact sheet for each person attending the program.
2. Review additional resources listed, including Web sites. Obtain any pieces you wish to use to support the lesson.
3. Select one or more activities to use with the lesson, and assemble supplies needed: index cards, extra pens or pencils, flip chart or white board.

Theory base: *Everyone to the Table*

The lesson *Everyone to the Table – Family Meals Serve Us Well* is based on the social cognitive theory. This theory of health education emphasizes that people’s behaviors and knowledge affect their future behaviors.¹ In social cognitive theory, behavior is dynamic, depending on the environment and the person. As these three parts (behavior, environment and the person) interact and co-exist, each part will change and adapt.

The environment can affect our behavior without our being aware of its influence. Have family meals decreased or disappeared because of the many tugs a family feels from its environment? Or, does the *situation* of a family meal guide a family member’s *behavior* – individual behavior that reaches beyond, but includes, nutrition gained at the table? Behavior is a result “of a shared environment with other family members and their behaviors and personal characteristics, all of which function within a larger environment.”¹

When shared meals are part of a family's environment, the meals *themselves* become motivation to family members – in a variety of ways.

Discussion activities

Select the activity that better fits the ages and stages of participants

1. Think about your main family meals during the past week.
 - How many days did you eat together as a family?
 - Was the television on during meals?
 - Was there conversation among family members?
 - Were there arguments?
 - What else happened at mealtime?
 - What is one way you would like family mealtimes to be different? What is your goal?

(Leaders might wish to distribute index cards for participants to jot answers on one side and goals on the other. Encourage participants to keep the goals in view at home – maybe on the refrigerator – to help make family meals happen.)

- “Eat Better, Eat Together” magnets could support the lesson. *(See the Washington State University Web site, under “Additional resources,” for ordering information.)*

2. Remember back to family meals in the past – maybe when you were growing up or when your family was young.
 - What is one family meal memory that stands out in your mind?
 - What is one aspect you consider essential to a successful family meal?
 - What might you share (a quick recipe, a no-fail menu, a positive philosophy) with a young family that hasn't experienced family mealtimes?
(Consider recording responses on a flip chart or white board to facilitate discussion.)

Additional resources

1. A display, “Meal Time, Family Time,” is available on loan through local or area K-State Research and Extension offices. Visit <http://www.humec.ksu.edu/fnp/displays/mealtime.html> to view the display and supporting pieces that are available free from the site.
2. From Washington State University Nutrition Education, an “Eat Better, Eat Together Tool Kit” is available. Access it at <http://nutrition.wsu.edu/ebet/toolkit.html>. The kit includes downloadable handouts “Who Has Time for Family Meals?” and “Family Mealtime – Who Does What?”

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Reference

1. Glanz K, Lewis FM, Rimer BK, eds. *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 1997.

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