

The Science of Family Meal Time: A Child and Family Development Perspective

This lesson focuses on applying the science of meal times to help families encourage further cognitive, social emotional, and physical development. As a leader presenting this material, please remember the diversity of both what your audiences consider family and of what and when a meal time consists.

Intended Audience:

- » Parenting groups
- » Families
- » SNAP-Ed classes

Preparation

- » Read the fact sheet and leader's guide thoroughly.
- » Have a copy of the fact sheet for each participant

Teaching Points

Emphasize the following points when teaching from the fact sheet:

Why focus on family meal time?

Begin by conveying to your audience that there are multiple legitimate reasons to focus on their family meals as a place to make a difference. There is a tremendous and wide-ranging body of knowledge supporting the importance of family meal times as beneficial for all involved.

Family meals and adolescents

Emphasize the facts about teens and family meals from the fact sheet, as well as this information not included in the fact sheet:

Additional research (Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, Fulkerson, Story, & Larson, 2008) results indicated that girls in families who regularly eat meals together are less likely to have chaotic eating habits, even when taking into account other factors, such as socio-economic status, body mass index (BMI), family connectedness, parental influences on dieting, and the girls' own extreme weight-control behaviors.



What is "family meal time"?

Introduce the concept of "fictive kin" to participants. It can be helpful for your audiences to cast a wider net when it comes to thinking about what to consider as family meal time.

Many in the audience will be able to relate the concrete example of unofficial "aunts" and "uncles" and may be willing to share from their experience, as time allows.

Meal time

Let your audience know that meal time, likewise, can be broadly thought of, and does not require a sit-down dinner or supper, nor even dinner or supper at all.

You may want to allow for some discussion of this point.

Great! I want to have family meal time, what do I need to know?

Emphasize the points about scheduling and conversations.

Be sure to highlight the value of family conversations during meals.

Further, researchers have found relationships between children having frequent evening meals with their parents and decreased risks of their smoking, drinking or using other drugs. In addition, research shows that parental

engagement fostered around the table is one of the most important ways parents can raise healthy, drug-free children and adolescents.

Preparing for meal time conversations: Being intentional and scaffolding

Meal time conversations do not always happen without help. Adults can be most effective with children of all ages by being intentional and scaffolding the conversation. By presenting this information to your participants in two parts (i.e. how to think about the meal time, and what to do during meal time), you provide an important way for your audience to understand both the process and content of what you are presenting.

Thinking about Meal Time

Emphasize the points about being intentional and being mindful and present during meals.

Scaffolding

This concept may be new to the audience. Scaffolding is a useful metaphor for understanding what your audience can do to help make meal times most beneficial. Scaffolding (*Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976*) is a process to help people learn. The term is based on a building scaffold, which is used before the building (in this case, knowledge) is solid. Once the building is solid, the scaffolding is no longer necessary, and it can be used in new construction.

While there are many ways to scaffold your participants' thinking, some helpful strategies to consider for shared meal times include: asking questions, providing information, modeling, providing feedback, maintaining interest, and setting the stage.

Division of Responsibility in Feeding

Explain Ellyn Satter's Feeding Dynamics Model, as presented in the fact sheet. Allow time for discussion, because this may be a new concept to some.

Conclusion

In summary, family meal times provide opportunities for intentionally building connections that we know are beneficial for all family members. We encourage you to be creative in thinking about family meals in every aspect from the when, where, and what of the food to how, why, and who of conversations. Your time together as a family makes a difference.



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