

Family Dinners Can Improve Mental, Spiritual and Physical Health

We desperately need to bring back the family dinner. Most families just don't have the time, or the desire, to sit together around a table and eat at the same time with no electronics in the way.

That sad trend has led to a number of troubling consequences that we need to reverse.

Dr. Anne Fishel is a family therapist at the prestigious Massachusetts General Hospital and a professor at Harvard Medical School. She's also a wife and mother.

In her new book, *Home For Dinner: Mixing Food, Fun, and Conversation for a Happier Family and Healthier Kids*, she uses scientific studies to build a solid case for making the effort to eat together as a family ... whatever your family happens to look like at the moment.

Regardless of whether you have babies and toddlers who are difficult to keep sitting still, school-age kids loaded down with homework and extra-curricular activities, sullen teenagers who don't want to participate in anything, or perhaps you are empty nesters, the scenario is the same: Eating together around a table will improve your health in a variety of ways.

Researchers considered a family that "eats together" as one that gathers around the table with food, without electronics, at a minimum of five meals per week. That can be breakfast, lunch or dinner. More is better than less. Here's what they found:

Family Dinners Are Good for the Brain, the Spirit and the Body

Over the past 30 years, researchers at the Harvard School of Education have found consistently that as a way to boost children's vocabulary, talking to them during dinner is even better than reading to them. Children with well-developed vocabularies will have an easier time learning to read.

Studies of school-aged children found children who have regular family dinners perform better academically in school. This is true for children of all socioeconomic levels.

Furthermore, teenagers who regularly ate family dinners were twice as likely to get A's than those who didn't.

Family Dinners Are Good for Mental Health

A number of studies have found a correlation between regular family dinners and a reduction of high-risk behaviors, especially among teenagers. This includes smoking, binge drinking, marijuana use, violence and sexual activity.

Family Dinners Are Good for Physical Health

The research shows profound evidence that people who regularly eat family dinners have better weight control, better nutritional intake and better eating habits than those who don't.

The reasons family dinners are so important are numerous. Topping the list is the fact that sitting around the table talking is one of the few ways family members can connect meaningfully with each other. It's a ritual that conveys meaning and stability that are vital for the emotional well-being of every family member.

Another key point is the fact that when you and your kids are sitting together enjoying a meal you—and more importantly they—are *not* doing other things that can be troublesome, such as spending time in front of some type of screen.

Don't worry if the idea of eating a family dinner makes you feel intimidated. In her book, Dr. Fishel explains how to manage dinner conversations in a way that makes them the most productive and conflict-free.

For example, she suggests avoiding asking a family member an open-ended question such as, "How was your day?" which is bound to illicit a single word response such as, "Fine."

Instead, she suggests asking a question that requires explanation, such as "What was the funniest thing that happened to you today?"

If you're a busy person who also happens to be clumsy in the kitchen, don't fret. Dr. Fishel explains how to ditch those unhealthy drive-thrus and make your own nutritious dinners in a flash.

As an added bonus, she suggests ways to get the whole family involved in meal preparation (and clean-up) no matter what ages you're dealing with. She includes a number of delicious, affordable recipes such as this vegetable soup, which sounds delightful this time of year:

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