

Why Your Family Dinners Offer More Than Food

“Growing up, I learned life’s important lessons at the dinner table.” –Chef John Besh

Since I live in a university town and students sometimes miss the homecooked meals they left behind, our faculty members often invite students to join our family meals. A colleague of mine invited a student to join him and his wife for dinner one Thursday night. The prayer was said, the meatloaf was served and 10 minutes had elapsed into their meal. Then the young college sophomore began to weep.

“What’s wrong?” asked my friend. “You don’t like meatloaf?”

Through her tears, she answered, “This is wonderful! My family didn’t do this. I have never had a meal like this. We went to restaurants, but we never ate a meal together at home. It was hard to even see the table. My mom used it as a craft table and storage spot, so it was always piled high. I don’t even know how to set a table.”

This was such a strange concept for me to absorb. We always had family meals when I was growing up. In fact, we often shared two meals a day—breakfast and dinner. Breakfast seemed to be a shovel-it-in-and-get-the-day-started meal, but dinner? Well, dinner was different. It seemed to be the time for our family to reconnect and catch up on each other’s days. We would laugh and learn together. We were a family. We even had designated chairs.

In many households, meals together need to be made a priority again. “We’re just too busy,” can’t be overused as an excuse to neglect this opportunity to bond. Discussion around the family table can model social skills and will hopefully prevent misunderstandings due to lack of communication and

awareness. They can be pleasurable times of interaction.

If once a week is all you can muster, it will have to do, but once isn't really enough so strive for more. Finding the time will be easy if it is upheld as a family priority.

Have a "no-screens" rule. Social technology has no place at the table. Inviting the television to the gathering defeats the purpose as well. There may an atypical occasion when you watch a special program or event during a meal, but make it a rarity. Let the answering machine take your messages until after the meal as well.

Make it a team effort. The table needs to be set and cleared, the groceries need to be bought, the food prepared and so on. Everyone can help. Just make sure the activities are age appropriate.

If your family doesn't already have the tradition of the family meal, why not start? You need to eat anyway; why not nourish your family at the same time? {eo}

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This article originally appeared at .