



10 Tips for Quality Family Meals

Family meals are a great time for families to get in touch with each other.

Try these ideas for positive family meals.

1. Aim for 3 or more meals a week.

Children and teenagers, who eat with their family 3 times or more a week, do better in school. If you do not eat together now or not as you'd like, look at your schedules to see if family meals can replace other activities. Start with just one meal a week and add more later. Children value meal times with their family. Families usually enjoy eating together after they try it.

2. Make family meals a priority.

Adults can make family meals a priority and expect children, teenagers and adults to eat together. They may complain at first, but if meals are pleasant, children and teenagers will begin to value the time together.

3. Keep a sense of humor and laugh a lot.

It's not "what" but "how" you feed your family that counts. Simple foods served with love and laughter will outshine gourmet food.

4. Cook it Quick but Eat It Slow

Though you may hurry when preparing a meal, allow ample time to enjoy the meal and talk with each other.

5. Work toward happy, relaxing conversations at meals.

Allow time for everyone to talk---children as well as adults. Save arguments for later. Here are some conversation starters:

- Describe something new you learned today.
- Share a positive thing that happened today.
- Describe something that made you feel really happy.
- Imagine that someone gave you \$1,000. You have to spend some of it on your family before buying anything for yourself. What would you buy for your family?
- If you lived in a different time and place, where and when would you live?
- If you could spend an afternoon with a famous person (living or dead), who would you pick?

If everyone in your family wants to talk at once, borrow the "talking stick" idea from Native Americans. Only the person holding the stick can talk. You might have another special item that gets passed around.

6. If time's an issue, make meals quick and easy.

Food does not have to be hot to be nourishing and healthful. Tuna sandwiches, an apple and milk can be just as healthful as hot food you worked for hours to prepare. Make and freeze extra food on the weekend for quick microwave meals that are ready in a flash. For quick meal ideas see <http://www.nutritionexplorations.org>

7. Shop for food and cook together.

Grocery shopping and cooking together can be fun and promote family togetherness. Younger children are proud and excited to eat meals they helped prepare.

8. Take telephone calls later.

How often does the phone interrupt your meals? If you can't ignore a ringing phone, unplug it, turn off the ringer, use an answering machine or voice mail, or tell people you will call back after dinner. If you need to answer calls immediately, such as those from an ill parent, get caller I.D.

9. Turn the TV Off

The TV is not a family member. Encourage family members to star in their own lives and relate to each other rather than an image on the TV

screen. If there is an "absolutely must see" show that occurs during dinnertime, tape it for later viewing.

10. Respect each individual's right to decide how much to eat.

Serious family conflicts can occur when children are forced to eat. Forcing children to eat food they don't like makes them dislike the food or learn to ignore feelings of hunger and satiety.

A parent's role is to offer a child safe, healthful food. Offer food on a regular schedule (every 2 hours for young children). A child's role is to decide to eat the food or not and how much to eat. If a child does not eat the food in a reasonable amount of time, take the food away. For more information about good parent/child relationships around food see *How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not Too Much* by Ellyn Satter.

Healthy, active children eat about the same amount of food everyday---enough to meet the needs for growth and play.

Remember:

Pausing for family meals is good insurance for healthy families, children, and teenagers.