



Discovering the Power of Family Meals

Family meals have become a lost tradition among the American people. Nowadays, most food consumption takes place outside the home due to our hectic schedules and our fast-paced society. Also, the concept of eating together at the dinner table, as a family, has been replaced with eating alone while doing some other activity. Patterns such as eating while watching television and listening to music or working in the computer have become more commonplace. The decline in family meals is due to factors such as parents' long working hours and children's after school activities. But despite this decline, teens and their families have described family meals as joyful moments and they have reported a preference for dining together rather than being eating alone while doing another activity.

The benefits of family meals are countless. The literature has reported that family meals have a positive influence not only in the children and adolescent's psychological well being but also on their dietary quality as well. Frequent family meals enhance emotional development of all family members by establishing closer emotional relationships. Family meals create long-lasting happy memories and food memories as well. Children and adolescents coming from families with a tradition of participating in family meals are strongly connected to their families. This family connection has a positive impact on youth self-esteem, moral values, and a better sense of control over their lives.

Family meals are also beneficial for parents since they report having better relationships with their children and spouses. Working parents who engage in family meals more frequently without distractions have higher satisfaction with their jobs.

Conversation during family meals helps children, especially younger kids, to improve their vocabulary, reading skills, and intellectual development. These would contribute to a better performance in all school subjects; therefore, leading to higher academic achievement that would last through teen years.

Furthermore, frequency of family meals is associated with avoidance of high-risk behaviors (smoking, drinking, and doing drugs) and making healthy food choices. Frequency of family meals increase dietary intake of fruits and vegetables and reduce consumption of high calorie foods; therefore, reducing the risk of childhood obesity and its nutrition-related chronic conditions. In addition, dining together help reduce extreme weight control behavior associated with females which protects them from eating disorders and its consequences. As a result, frequent family meals will promote children's lifelong healthy eating behaviors and lifestyles.

Family meals are essential for our children and adolescents' psychological, social, and physical development. Family meals can definitely make a difference in our family relationship and in our society making it important for us to restore the tradition of family meals.

Tips for Successful Family Meals



- ❖ Prioritize and make time for at least 3 to 4 family meals per week.
- ❖ Plan a menu and include healthy foods. Keep it simple by adding fruits and vegetable salads to your menu. Focus on family favorite dishes.
- ❖ Be creative with place and time of meal. Plan a picnic or a Sunday brunch.
- ❖ Make your family meal a distraction-free zone and turn off all electronics. This is a time for nurturing your family only (no TV, texting, or computer at meal times).
- ❖ Get the whole family involved. Let kids help you with meal preparation and table setting. This will make kids feel valued and respected.
- ❖ Avoid all subjects that may lead to conflict. Meal times are not for complaints and for too many questions.
- ❖ Create a relaxing environment by playing soothing music and putting flowers on the table.
- ❖ Remember that meal times are a great opportunity for parents to connect with their children, share their experiences, and instill moral values.

Reference: Fruh, S. M., Fulkerson, J. A., Mulekar, M. S, Kendrick, L. A., & Clanton, C. (2011). The surprising benefits of the family meal. *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, 7(1): 18-22 doi:10.1016/j.nurpra.2010.04.017