

Setting the Table for Meals Together

The following module will present information on the importance of eating meals together. It will describe the benefits of eating meals together, including: the nutritional benefits of eating meals together, how to develop a routine to eat meals together, tips for handling the choosy eater; and techniques to engage children in eating meals together.



Eating Together

Sharing meal time together provides a sense of family. Parents have the opportunity to share family values, culture and ethnic heritage. Children have the opportunity to learn. The food served reinforces cultural and ethnic learning.



Eating moose, fish, or other traditional foods places value on those foods and provides the perfect opportunity to share stories about adventures in hunting, catching, gathering and preparing the foods. Serving foods that reflect your family's culture such as traditional Alaska Native, Mexican, Asian, or Pacific Islander is a perfect way to instill cultural and ethnic heritage in children.

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, CASA, at Columbia University surveyed teenage children and parents. CASA reported that both parents and children noted that regular meals eaten together enabled healthy communication, increased daily family connections and enabled parents to monitor their children's moods, behaviors and whereabouts.¹ Children growing up eating meals with their parents on a regular basis may communicate better in the adolescent years.



It is not surprising that mealtime conversations increase children's vocabularies. Mealtimes present opportunities for children and parents to engage in lively discussion which include stories about past events, plans for the future and explanations of how the world works. In addition, meal times provide the time to talk about food, nutrition and healthy eating. The words used in these types of conversations are not usually found in children's storybooks. Increasing a child's vocabulary improves reading and writing skills.



FIGURE 4a: Percentage of Teens Who Get Mostly A's and B's in school¹

TABLE TALK

MORE ABOUT FAMILY

www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/380-2005_family_dinners_ii_final.pdf

Mealtime conversations have been shown to generate a larger amount of sophisticated word usage than other activities such as toy play or storybook reading.² Improved child vocabulary outcomes were most strongly connected to mealtime conversations and information book reading.³



Research has shown that eating meals together serves as a “protective factor” in the lives of teens. Eating meals together increases teenagers’ well-being and decreases teenagers risk of drug and alcohol use. Research shows that children who eat dinner together have better social skills and the more dinners teens reported eating together with their family, the better their grades.¹ See figure 4a.

Setting the table and eating together when children are toddlers and preschoolers will help establish a dinner routine that can be continued when the children become teens.



Children learn by watching adults. Therefore, it is important that adults encourage and model healthy eating and behaviors. Adults should sit with children at the table, eat the same or similar foods as the children and enjoy the foods they are eating by talking about how food is good for the body.

Adults should help children select moderate portion sizes, encourage children to taste new foods and let children know it is OK to stop eating when they feel full. If children see adults eating fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods they will also choose to eat those healthy foods.



Meals Together = Healthier Diet

Project EAT findings suggest children who eat meals as a family have a healthier diet, including an increase in fruit and vegetable intake. Eating fruits and vegetables is a great way for children to get the nutrients they need to be healthy and grow strong.

High fruit and vegetable intakes have been shown to decrease the risk of many diseases including heart disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity. Experts recommend preschoolers eat 2½–3½ cups (5–7 servings) of fruits and vegetables each day. Children who eat fruits and vegetables are likely to continue eating them for a lifetime.

THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (CDC)

www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/5aday/index.htm

THE 2005 DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR AMERICANS

www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

www.5aday.org/pdfs/research/health_benefits.pdf

MORE MATTERS

PROJECT EAT

The University of Minnesota conducts Project EAT: Eating Among Teens. Project EAT is designed to investigate the factors influencing eating habits of adolescents, to determine if youth are meeting national dietary recommendations and to explore dieting and physical activity patterns among youth. Project EAT studied the frequency of family meals and associations with dietary intake in 4,746 middle and high school students. As the number of family meals per week went up consumption of fruits, vegetables, grains and calcium-rich foods increased, while soft drink consumption went down. Protein, energy, calcium, iron, folate, fiber and vitamin A, C, E and B6 consumption also increased as the number of family meals increased.⁴

In a comparison of children aged 9-14 who ate family dinners most days to those who ate family dinners never or only a few days a week, children who ate meals together more often had a more healthful diet, including more fruits and vegetables, less fried food, less soft drinks; less saturated and trans fat; and more fiber, calcium, folate, iron and vitamins.⁵ These studies suggest that the presence of family meals in an adolescent’s life results in a more healthful eating pattern.

The research regarding the health benefits of eating fruits and vegetables shows a connection between fruit and vegetable consumption and disease prevention. Fruits and vegetables are complex foods and provide a variety of nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, phytonutrients, fiber and some nutrients which have not even been researched. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that individuals eat 5–11 servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a range of 2½–6½ cups (5–13 servings) of fruits and vegetables each day. The guidelines also recommend choosing from all five vegetable subgroups: dark green, orange, legumes (beans), starchy vegetables and others. Since preschoolers need fewer calories than adults, the recommendation is 2½–3½ cups (5–7 servings) of fruits and vegetables each day. It is clear that the scientific community agrees that more matters when eating fruits and vegetables.

Studies suggest that the presence of family meals results in increased calcium intake. Calcium is a mineral that is needed for building healthy, strong, bones and teeth. It is important that children get enough calcium everyday to build bone strength and prevent bone disease such as osteoporosis. Osteoporosis results in brittle bones that break easily. Bone diseases usually afflict older adults but may be prevented by adequate calcium intake during the growing years.

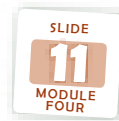


In Southeast Alaska, good calcium sources include all canned salmon, leather chiton, ribbon seaweed, beach asparagus and kelp with herring eggs.⁶ In the Yukon Kuskokwim–Delta region calcium-rich foods include all canned salmon, blackfish, needlefish, bone marrow, fish head soup, smelt, tomcod and whitefish liver.⁷



Studies suggest that the presence of family meals results in children drinking less soda pop and eating less fried food.⁵ Meals eaten at home generally include fewer fried foods than meals eaten away from home; thus children will consume less fat and saturated fat. Soda pop has no nutrients, just calories. Soda pop also contains a great deal of sugar that can cause cavities. For these reasons, nutritionists recommend that preschoolers avoid soda pop.

Choosy Eaters



Preschool-age children go through a normal developmental phase called “neophobia,” or fear of new things, such as new foods. This stage is mistakenly called “picky eater” or “choosy eater.” To help preschoolers overcome the natural tendency to reject new foods, a variety of foods should be consistently offered to preschool children. This will eventually lead to more healthful eating habits.⁸

And, just like children overcome their fear of going down the slide at the playground, they will also overcome their fear of new foods.

Food jags in children (when children only want to eat one food) are common. Food jags rarely last long enough to be harmful. Children who are energetic and growing are probably eating enough. The strategies for addressing choosy eaters can also be used to get children through the food jag phase.



Even though it may be frustrating, repeatedly offer healthy foods to children, even foods that have been rejected before. Research by childhood nutrition experts shows that it can take up to a dozen times before a food becomes familiar to a child. So, continue to offer a variety of healthy foods to preschoolers to help overcome the natural tendency to reject new foods. The more times the food is introduced the more likely the food will become familiar.

Encourage children to try each food. Do not talk about what a choosy eater a child is in front of the child. Children believe and become what their parents and caregivers say. Children benefit when parents praise them for their accomplishments and are patient and understanding.

Preschoolers should eat 2–3 servings of low-fat dairy each day plus eat a variety of other calcium rich foods. The best sources of calcium are dairy products such as low fat milk, cheese, yogurt and cottage cheese. However, dark green leafy vegetables, canned salmon and small fish with edible bones are also good calcium sources.



GOT CALCIUM?
SUGAR-FREE

Cavity Free Kids is an oral health curriculum for Head Start programs with many classroom and parent education units that discuss sugar.

Calcium is a mineral that the body needs for numerous functions, including building and maintaining bones and teeth, blood clotting, sending nerve impulses and regulating the heart's rhythm. Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) give recommendations on how much calcium should be consumed each day. For 1–3 year olds, 500 milligrams of calcium a day is recommended. The recommendation for 4–8 year olds is 800 milligrams of calcium a day.

One cup low-fat milk has about 300 milligrams of calcium, eight ounces of yogurt has about 275 milligrams and three ounces of canned salmon has 180 milligrams. Therefore, preschool aged children should eat 2–3 servings of dairy each day plus a variety of other calcium rich foods.

When dealing with a food jag, serve a small serving of the favored food along with healthy foods. This way the child still gets his or her favored food but may be hungry enough to eat something else too. When introducing a child to a new food, serve one- or two- tablespoon portions. This way the child will not feel overwhelmed by the food. Don't give up!

Research conducted through the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at Colorado State University has noted that children need up to eight to twelve exposures to a food before they will try it willingly.



Allow children to explore and taste foods. It may seem like children play with their food but children may just be exploring. Children will smell food, examine its texture, look at it and eventually taste! Do not rush children to eat. Trying new foods takes time. Do not use food to reward, bribe or punish children. Children will learn that food jags and refusal to eat foods gives them control.

Scheduling Mealtime

Just like most things in life that get done, make eating together a priority on a regular basis. Although dinner or breakfast is the most likely meal of choice, lunch could be the selected meal depending on family schedules.

Families should think about how many meals a week they are eating together. With a little effort most families should be able to add one more to the list. One meal together is better than none, six meals together are better than five. Set a meal schedule of which meals will be eaten together, establish a time and who is responsible for planning, cooking and organizing the meal.

Once the schedule is set, require that permission is received for absence from meals to help establish the value of eating together. Attempt to re-schedule the meal before allowing the absence.

Even the best set plans encounter conflict. Being flexible with mealtime or location will increase the chances of eating together. If adults or older children have events or a meeting to attend, adjust the meal time. Eat your meal together a little earlier or later than planned. Toddlers and preschoolers may need a healthy snack if meal-times are later than usual.

For example, the family could eat a meal together picnic style before a play or sporting event. Pack a picnic of sandwiches and cold salads!



Sometimes children will not be interested in eating together. They will say they are not hungry and

do not want to eat because they would rather play with toys, the pet, or friends. However, to maintain consistency in the family or children's life, children should participate in mealtime even if they choose not to eat.

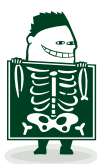
It is also important to consistently reinforce meal time behavior. Behaviors that can be reinforced include using the words "please" and "thank you," requesting permission before leaving the table and taking dishes to the sink.

Planning, cooking and organizing meals does not need to be one person's responsibility. Determining the division of responsibility helps all family members feel they have an important role in the meal. Today, most people feel short on time, so keep mealtime preparations simple, easy and nutritious.

Share meal tasks such as preparation and cooking with all family members. Children of all ages can help plan and shop for meals. Involve children in meal tasks from planning, preparations and cooking. Even toddlers and preschoolers can help in meal planning and preparation.



FOSTERING GOOD HABITS



Teachers and caregivers can help children overcome their choosy eating by allowing them to explore and taste new foods. With the rise in childhood overweight, it is important that we establish healthful eating habits early in life. The preschool years are a critical time to introduce and encourage healthy nutrition because early exposure to healthful foods helps children establish good eating habits that carry into adulthood.⁹

Children establish food preferences and dietary habits during the first six years of life.⁹ Additionally, children's eating behaviors, food preferences and willingness to try new foods are influenced by the people around them. Parents and other caregivers influence children's eating practices in several ways. They control availability and accessibility of foods, determine how and when meals are served, model eating behaviors and establish good manners and etiquette around food.^{10, 11} Thus, it is important to educate teachers about nutrition and share practical strategies for encouraging preschoolers to try new foods.

Involve Children

Having toddlers and preschoolers help with meal preparation will help raise their interest in the foods that are served, will provide practice of fine motor skills and will provide time for interaction with other family members. Toddlers can carry unbreakable dishes to the table, wash fruits and vegetables and wipe down the table top.

Children feel important when they are given tasks so let children help even if working alone is faster. Children and parents working together in the kitchen allows for bonding time and lets children practice skills.

Preschoolers will be able to mix or stir foods, make sandwiches, spread soft spreads, tear lettuce, help to pour and measure and set the table. Ask your child what he or she would like to do to help you. Children will come up their own ideas from picking flowers to making placemats for the table.



Engage Children

Once a meal time schedule is set and the meal is cooked, strive to make meal times pleasurable, enjoyable and engaging for children. Create a relaxed setting for meals by removing non-food items from the table, even if things are just set on the floor temporarily, by turning off the TV, setting a policy about not answering the phone during meal time and putting pets outside or in another room.

Before sitting down for a meal, give a five-minute warning and ensure everyone washes his or her hands!

Serve food that children can eat without help. Toddlers and preschoolers will be at different ability levels. They do not require different foods, just food in a different form. Children will also benefit from child size or smaller size forks, spoons and knives. Place foods into easy to lift containers and allow children to serve themselves. This will improve fine motor skills, reinforce self-efficacy and allow children to self-regulate portion sizes.



Toddlers will be able to hold a cup by the handle, pour liquids from a small pitcher, use a fork and chew most foods. Toddlers generally need an adult or older sibling to cut up foods such as meat and vegetables into bite-size pieces.

Preschoolers will likely be able to use a knife and fork, drink from a cup and have an increased ability to feed themselves. Preschoolers may be able to cut up some foods but may still require help for meat and tougher foods.

Eating meals together means that adults and children sit and eat together. Eating and talking with children during mealtime allows adults to model good eating behaviors and provides opportunities to talk about food tradition and cultures. Talking about the texture, taste and color of foods allows children to explore all five senses (sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing) right at the dinner table!

During the meal, set a good example with respect, listening and patience. Talk about events, news and funny things that happened during the day or week.

Sometimes having ideas for conversation starters and games helps engage children in mealtime discussions. Have each family member bring an object to the table and talk about it, just like show and tell in school. Tell stories about pictures in an old family photo. Pick events and family members from the past who younger family members might not know.





TONGUE TWISTERS TO TWY

Yellow butter, purple jelly, red jam, black bread. Spread it thick, say it quick!
Yellow butter, purple jelly, red jam, black bread. Spread it thicker, say it quicker!
Yellow butter, purple jelly, red jam, black bread. Don't eat with your mouth full!

Chester Cheetah chews a chunk of cheap cheddar cheese. Bake big batches of bitter brown bread.

Play word and memory games. For example, in the Food Alphabet game, one person names a food and the next person names a food that begins with the last letter of the first food's name. Preschoolers will need help with this game. To include them, they could start each round by naming a food.

Fill a container with questions. Pick out a question and have everyone answer it. Add some imaginary questions and "what if" questions to spice up the conversation. Play Simon says at the table. This may work to get a child to try a new food!



After the meal team up for fast clean-up. Take turns selecting the music for easier cleanup. Allow the lead cleanup person to play the music. Preschoolers will be able to help clear the table, dry dishes, place some dishes in the bottom rack of the dishwasher and wipe the table clean. Children learn teamwork skills by helping with family chores.

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