

The Importance of Family Meals

By Jana Morgan Herman, MEd

Did you know there is a way to increase your children's vocabulary by tens of thousands of words, help them to become better listeners, allow them to express themselves more civilly, convey feelings of parental understanding, ensure they have higher nutrition levels, reduce their stress, and make them less likely to smoke or use drugs?

It's simple: Have a family meal together once a day.

By sharing meals together as a family, children learn firsthand what values are important to their family. Without thinking or planning, parents are showing their children how to converse with others in meaningful ways. Children watch as parents ask after each other and help console each other on a rough day, or celebrate milestones or achievements. They see how people who care about each other offer support and courtesy, learn to gauge others to see how they respond, and acquire a host of other important communication skills.

Children who eat dinner with their families learn more about their cultural (what, how, and when they eat), ethnic, and religious beliefs. A study from Emory University (Bohanek et al., 2006) shows that children who know a lot about their family history have a closer relationship to family members, higher self-esteem, and a greater sense of control over their lives. These benefits extend even into the teenage years! 71% of teens in a Columbia University study reported that catching up and spending time with family was the best part of family dinners. Research shows that children who eat family meals get better grades, are more motivated, and get along better with others (CASA, 2012). On the other hand, a 2011 study shows that children who do not have family meals are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, try drugs, feel depressed, or have trouble at school (CASA, 2011). A team of researchers at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health found that, even if the family members are not very close, having a meal together reduces the risk for many of these troubling behaviors among youth (Gengler, 2011).

It may take a bit of thinking and rearranging schedules, but family meals provide better outcomes than other after-school activities. So unless your child loves those activities, consider letting one or some go to make time for family meals. Additionally, meals eaten at home are usually healthier than meals eaten on the go, and children are likelier to eat a variety of foods that they prepare with you and benefit from learning how to plan a menu and shop for ingredients.

This practice may take a little getting used to, and, depending on your schedules, maybe a different meal would work better for you—think family

breakfast. In the end, having a meal together (without the TV on or phones at the table) provides an ideal context to grow together as a family. It's not surprising that, for as long as there have been people, celebrating—even brokering peace—has been done by breaking bread together.

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