

healthy LIVING



Family Meals Foster Good Eating Habits For Everyone

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When something in an already jam-packed family schedule has to give, it's easy to understand why mealtime may be one of the first things to fall by the wayside. And yet, family meals are not only a time for strengthening family ties and keeping track of our kids' lives, they can actually lead to better physical and mental health for our children.

Children in families that eat together typically consume less fast food, soft drinks, and fat-laden junk food. Instead, they consume more fruits and vegetables, complex carbohydrates, lean sources of protein and in general eat a wider variety of foods which ensure they are getting the full spectrum of nutrients in their diets. By eating a family meal together several times per week, children develop good eating habits early on which helps them to be healthier for the rest of their lives.

We (parents) play a big role in shaping our children's eating habits. When we eat a variety of foods that are fresh, healthful and wholesome, our kids learn to like these foods as well. Our own commitment to a healthy diet will encourage our children to recognize the importance of good nutrition. This can carry over into settings where kids make their own choices. For example, if your child eats lunch at school, review the weekly lunch menu with your child and make suggestions for healthier options.

Preparing meals at home gives us control over both the quality and quantity of food being consumed. We can help our children understand how to eat until they're comfortably satisfied (but not stuffed) by letting them serve themselves as early as age five. Using "family style" serving bowls and spoons allows every member of the family to choose what he or she likes best. Unlike what our own parents may have taught us, try not to tell your kids they need to clean their plates before being dismissed from the table. Instead tell your child to "tune in" to their sense of fullness and ask them how their tummies feel both before and after eating a healthful meal.



The following tips may be helpful in jump-starting your regular family meals:

Plan ahead for family meals just one or two times per week, perhaps on weekends or at breakfast until everyone gets the hang of it.

Share the duties of shopping, cooking, and clean-up with the kids. This is where all the fun takes place!

Stay simple! Good food doesn't have to be fancy food. Soups, salads and sandwiches can be the easiest and the most healthful meals.

Regardless of the meal, take time to sit down and really enjoy it with your family. Time spent at family meals will help your children form healthy attitudes about food and eating as well as create fond family memories that will last a lifetime.

Sara Peternell, MNT, is a nutrition practitioner in the Denver area, focusing on family nutrition, fertility, pregnancy, and the post-partum period. Sara is a Colorado native and Highlands resident. In her practice Family Nutrition Services (www.sarapeternell.com), she thoroughly enjoys helping people to jump start their healthy eating goals and make lasting changes.

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