



For Release: January - March 2006

Family Meals Get an “A+”

Life is busy. Parents are working inside and outside the home. Kids need to be taken to school, practice and/or other events. The dog is sick. This constantly on-the-go lifestyle may make it impossible to maintain routines, which are very important for the growth and development of children. Often, the family meal becomes a casualty of our rushed lifestyle.

Family meals are important for at least three reasons: (1) they provide children and teens with predictable structure; (2) eating together provides the family a chance to talk with each other, thereby strengthening family communication and bonding; and (3) children who share family meals:

- eat more fruits, vegetables and whole grains
- are less likely to snack on unhealthy foods
- have less substance abuse
- perform better academically
- are healthier
- have fewer eating disorders

- more -

FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

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Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program staff at MSU Extension can answer questions or help you learn more about money management, parent, food, nutrition and health issues. MSU Extension educators integrate university and community resources to provide tools that help families succeed. For more information on FCS programs in Michigan, call your county MSU Extension office. Check the government pages of your phone book for contact information.

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Despite recognition by most parents that dining together with their children is important, less than 50 percent actually do this regularly.

To rekindle the ritual of having family meals in your household, consider the following ideas (taken from a parent’s point of view).

- **Make it a priority to meet together.** Meet at home, in a restaurant or have a picnic before a ballgame.
- **Be a role model for healthy eating.** Set a good example for your children by limiting choices such as soft drinks, fast food, chips and sweets. If dad is eating broccoli, chances increase that your children will too!
- **Minimize distractions.** Eat at a table with the television off. Turn off the phone. Put the hand-held video games on the shelf.
- **Keep it simple.** Cold sandwiches with a salad and a glass of milk and fruit for dessert can be just as nutritious as a five-course meal. Creative use of leftovers saves time, as well as money.
- **Don’t force healthy eating.** The parent’s job is to decide what food is offered, when and where; the child’s job is to choose what and how much to eat. Avoid food fights wherever and whenever possible.

Tips for involving children and teenagers include:

1. Let kids help with meal planning, food purchase and preparation.
2. Give small children jobs like setting out napkins and silverware or garnishing the plates.
3. Older children may enjoy filling glasses with milk or water.
4. Involve teens with the cooking.
5. Allow teens to invite a friend for dinner.
6. Give your kids a chance to express their thoughts and opinions – not just on the meal but with all topics.

Whatever your schedule, make a commitment to eat together with your family. This single activity has the real possibility to enhance food choices, as well as social skills, and contribute to a cohesive family unit.

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For more information on these and other food and nutrition, health, family and parenting, and money management topics, contact the MSU Extension office.

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