



## Who's Coming to Dinner: The Importance of Family Meals

When 1,500 children were asked, "What do you think makes a happy family?" the answer they gave most often was doing things together.

One of the most important times a family can be together is mealtime. Mealtimes provide a great opportunity to interact with your kids and make sure that the people you love make time for one another.

If family mealtimes are rare in your household, you're not alone! According to a recent study of eating patterns in America, only 49 percent of the families studied ate dinner together seven nights a week, and 74 percent ate together five nights a week.

Today's families are busier than ever and mealtimes are a great opportunity not only to eat together but also to connect, laugh together and even problem solve.

Family meals provide opportunities for adults to share appropriate table manners and nutritious food choices. When children help with meals, they learn important skills such as shopping, setting the table, preparing food, serving food and cleaning up.

Eating together as a family can teach good communication skills such as listening patiently, and expressing one's opinion in a respectful manner. Mealtimes provide a natural setting for families to engage in moral and intellectual discussions that share family values. Family meals can also help create long-lasting family traditions and enhance cultural customs.

### FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

Michigan State University • 240 Agriculture Hall • East Lansing, MI • 48824-1039  
517/353-9102 • FAX: 517/353-4846 • <http://www.fcs.msue.msu.edu>



*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.*

*Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, or family status. Michigan State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture and counties cooperating. MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity institution.*

One of the first things a family can do is determine how many nights, and which nights, they will eat together. Although it may be difficult to eat together seven nights a week, a commitment should be made to eat together as often as possible. The whole family needs to understand the importance of sharing the meal together and making it a priority.

What can busy families do to make their mealtimes enjoyable?

1. Keep in mind that you may be too busy to have a family meal each night.

*Plan ahead, think creatively and make adjustments to fit your family's schedule. It may be as easy as changing the time of day you eat together.*

2. Turn off the television.

*If your family usually watches TV during dinner, begin with one or two meals a week with the TV off, and gradually increase this as time goes on. TV can be a distraction and can limit the important social interactions that make family mealtimes important.*

3. Don't worry about making big, fancy meals – keep the food simple.

*Elaborate meals are not necessary for quality family time. To save time and effort, keep the meals simple and easy to prepare.*

4. Involve the whole family in planning, preparing and serving meals.

*Listen to children's meal suggestions and try to make eating together fun. Studies show that children who participate in family dinners tend to have healthier diets than those who don't.*

5. Teach by example. If you make the family dinner a priority, your children will learn the importance of it.

*When you make pleasant family mealtimes a priority, your child or children will more likely be healthy, well-mannered and well-adjusted.*

For more information on these and other parenting, money management, food, nutrition or health issues, contact the MSU Extension office. MSU Extension Family and Consumer Science educators are located in all 83 Michigan counties to integrate university and community resources to help families succeed.

###

Provided by Jodi Spicer, associate program leader, Family and Consumer Sciences, Michigan State University Extension.

Sources:

NPD Group. 2002. 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Report on Eating Patterns in America. Port Washington, New York.

Gilman, M.W.: S.L. Rifas-Shiman; A.L. Frazier; H.R.H. Rockett; C.A. Camargo Jr.; A.E. Field; C.S. Berkey; G.A. Colditz; 2000. *Family Dinner and Diet Quality Among Older Children and Adolescents*. Archives Family Medicine 9:235-240.

Stinnett, Nick and John DeFrain. 1985. *Secrets of Strong Families*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.