



Family Dinner Night

Who can imagine the family meeting at the dinner table seven nights a week, everyone wound down from school or work and eager to enjoy a well balanced meal and good conversation?

We all know there seems to be a mountain of obstacles in front of the “family dinner.” Most families in America are challenged with schedules, energy and creativity to put together the meal, different likes and a greater likelihood that children will protest and a parent will acquiesce to the child’s wishes for a different meal. Many families are challenged by a food budget. There are often issues with siblings pestering each other (and their parents) and even many parents who are struggling with marital issues. Single parents, or families where a spouse often misses the meal because of working overtime face challenges of feeling overwhelmed and even lonely having to provide for the meal AND the atmosphere.

Consider these reasons as **motivators** for taking your family dinners to the next level!

1. Family dinners provide a chance for children to learn about social interaction, manners and vocabulary.
2. Family dinners are tied to a lower risk of smoking, drinking and using drugs, as well as a lower rate of depression in youth.
3. Children who experience family dinners regularly get better grades. AND, children who get better grades are less likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol.
4. Eating disorders are less frequent in families where the family meal is characterized by a good atmosphere.
5. Children who eat family meals eat healthier meals and are less likely to be overweight.
6. Siblings will get along better and love each other more.
7. At the dinner table, children are more likely to spontaneously discuss interactions and topics that they experienced in school, whereas, when parents ask their child after school, "how was school?" they tend to just say, "Fine."

Family Dinner Night Tips

The Schedule

Look at your schedule and set a realistic goal for how many or which nights will be special FDNs. Try to have at least 2 set nights that are really etched in stone. In our house, Sunday and Wednesday are the only choices for everyone to be present and for there not to be a rush.

The Yum Factor

Try to plan meals on those nights that everyone likes, or at least everyone likes 80% of the meal. No separate meals. Dessert too! Children like food better when they have had a hand in preparing. Involve them in some way if possible. It's a good idea to plan ahead so that the primary prepper doesn't have to become all stressed out about what to prepare.

The Fun Factor

Good digestion happens with good feelings. Save the serious talk with "Junior" about his behavior for another time. Try your best to set the difficulties to the side during the meal. Parents set the tone for the

children. Leave your worries and your electronic devices aside, and definitely, no TV. Think, “good conversation, pleasant topics, engage everyone at some point and in some way.”

The Atmosphere

Music - Each family and even each family member may have their own musical interest. If you are going to listen, try to make it something that everyone enjoys, even if it's not their favorite, and soft enough so conversation isn't strained.

Table – consider a table cloth on FDN, or maybe different place mats, engage the children in helping with the set up. My daughter likes to make an art project out of it! She makes name cards and likes to bring out the special glasses. Sometimes she writes out the menu on special paper. Special straws for drinks can be fun and even...dare I say, a small soda with a cherry at the bottom. Our rule is that a drink of milk must precede or follow the small soda, and no seconds on the soda, unless of course it's a holiday, then, maybe.

Candles – Candles get their own spot here! They are really a must. Humans, generally speaking, are mesmerized by a flame. There is much to say about it, but not here. Did you know...children who are exposed to fire in a healthy manner with their families, like campfires, candles at the table, fire pits in the back yard, etc. are less likely to do something dangerous or in secret with fire. Of course, always be safe and teach children how to be safe with and around fire.

Social Aspect

Remember, no one is rushing on FDN. Don't consider the food something to be inhaled and then run off to the next activity! Linger a bit around the table after it is cleared. Engage the children in what you know they like to talk about. Consider using the time to talk about something you might enjoy doing together later in the week. After the meal is a good time to get a little goofy even. Remember, the parents set the tone for the family. Parents know how much winding-up is too much for their children.

And for sure, if you did not have a positive experience with FDN as a child, take charge of it now. Soon, you will find that the family looks forward to FDN! Young children will learn to sit properly at the table for a longer period, because of what is being modeled for them and because the time is enjoyable. They will learn to eat a wider variety of foods, because they

are watching others try new things. They will learn how to behave with good manners. Reap the benefits of the good, old-time family meal!

The family is the child's laboratory. Teach them well and they will take their lessons to the classroom and the playground, and they will help define our culture as they develop into older children and young adults.