



The Importance of Eating Together

Why should we eat dinner together more often?

Most Canadian families are starved for time to spend together, and dinner may be the only time of the day when we can reconnect, leaving behind our individual pursuits like playing video games, emailing and doing homework. Dinner is a time to relax, recharge, laugh, tell stories and catch up on the day's ups and downs, while developing a sense of who we are as a family.

Do family dinners have any scientific benefits?

Over the past 15 years researchers have confirmed what parents have known for a long time: sharing a family meal is good for the spirit, the brain and the health of all family members. Recent studies link regular family dinners with many behaviors that parents pray for: lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy and depression, as well as higher grade-point averages and self-esteem. Studies also indicate that dinner conversation

is a more potent vocabulary-booster than reading, and the stories told around the kitchen table help our children build resilience. The icing on the cake is that regular family meals also lower the rates of obesity and eating disorders in children and adolescents. What else can families do that takes only about an hour a day and packs such a punch?



Finding Time

How many nights a week should we try to eat dinner together?

Researchers find that families who eat dinner together five nights a week reap great benefits, but there is no magic number, nor is dinner inherently preferable to other meals. If your family finds breakfast or weekend lunches easier meals for a gathering, then these could also "count."

We're just so busy. How can we find the time to cook and eat together?

Time is certainly one of the biggest obstacles to families gathering for dinner. One good strategy is to cook a big batch of soup or a double batch of a casserole over the weekend, and then freeze some to make weekday dinners easier. Some meals can be thrown together quickly with help from store-bought ingredients, like pre-cut veggies, or a pre-made pizza dough.

If you think of family dinner as a time to nourish your family, prevent all kinds of problems, increase your children's cognitive abilities, and provide pleasure and fun that they can build on for the rest of their lives, a nightly meal is an efficient use of time.

Is it wrong to eat dinner in front of the television?

Making a steady diet of eating family dinners in front of the TV would certainly interfere with the pleasures and benefits of conversation. Researchers have found that meals eaten in front of the TV do not carry the same mental health benefits as those eaten "unplugged." Certainly, it would be fine occasionally to watch a special program

Some of the most important conversations I've ever had occurred at my family's dinner table.

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