Mealtimes Have Changed...

In times past, people usually ate three meals a day. Most families ate breakfast and dinner together. This meal pattern is not so common any more. Families often spend "dinner time" doing children's activities, classes, sports, or errands. Work schedules may also interfere with meals. In many households, it has become optional to eat dinner together as a family. In fact, "dinner" may be any easy-to-get food that can be eaten in the car.

The Benefits of Family Meals

Family meals provide a time for children and parents to socialize with one another. Research shows that for preschoolers, family mealtime is one of the most important times to connect with parents. Good mealtime habits formed early will benefit children throughout life. A study done at Cincinnati Children's Hospital found that those teens who ate with adult family members an average of at least five times a week were less likely to use drugs or to fall victim to depression, compared to teens who ate with their parents only three times a week. Other studies also relate time spent with parents, at meals or otherwise, to improve outcomes for teens.

Family meals provide other benefits as well. There are nutritional rewards. Studies have shown the value of eating breakfast for improving behavior and learning in children. Family breakfasts provide a time when parents can make sure children get a good start for the school day.

Other evidence indicates that children's food preferences are shaped by the behavior of adults around them. Family meal times become an opportunity for parents to model healthful eating habits.

Let's Make this Practical!

Each family has to decide how best to plan time together. Parents should avoid feeling guilty about those times when the family can't eat together. Make the most of the time you have. Most research indicates that it is the presence of connected, caring parents rather than mere physical presence that helps reduce risky behavior in children. Having said that, how can parents use meal times as a way to express caring and make connections?
• Sit down with family members and identify days of the week when everyone is free at dinnertime. Make a plan to eat together on those nights. This works for breakfast and weekend lunches too.
• Make the time you spend eating together a time for relaxed talking. Share the important things going on in your life. This may encourage other family members to share with you. It also lets them know more about you.
• Avoid criticizing. Remember the goal is togetherness, not perfection!
• Model good manners. Children will learn from what you do more than from what you say.
• Introduce new foods gradually by encouraging children to take a small taste of the food. Over time, they are likely to learn to like the new food, but it often takes as many as ten "tries."
• Never force a child to eat more than what she or he wants.
• In summary, make family meals together a time to nurture the body and the mind.

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