**Family Meals: The Importance of Quality Time**

Enjoying family meals together helps with bonding & developing healthy eating habits. Learn why eating dinner as families matters.

When you think about family meals, what comes to mind? **Typically, it may be special occasions and holidays when your family sits together at the table, perhaps with guests.** Family members cook, eat a well-balanced meal, practice manners, talk, and engage. Why doesn’t this happen more often?

In many homes, family dinners don’t happen for many reasons including **long work or commute hours**, after school activities, homework, varied schedules, "starving" children, or being a single parent doing it all. **All of us experience times when the realities of life result in choosing fast foods instead of a healthy family meal, often eaten in shifts or staring at a screen.**

Of course, busy schedules and complicated lives can make it challenging for families to to enjoy [quality family time](https://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/2014-family-time-activity-ideas/), but family meals should be seriously considered due to the enormous benefits to everyone’s well-being. **According to a**[**2011 study published by Cornell University**](http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/upload/Family-Mealtimes-2.pdf)**, children who regularly enjoy family meals are 35 percent less likely to have eating disorders, 24 percent more likely to eat healthier foods, and 12 percent less likely to be overweight.**

## Benefits of Family Meals

* **Bonding and making memories**. Eating meals together allows time for family bonding and may even improve mental health. Eating together seems to contribute to fewer emotional and behavioral issues and greater feelings of mental well-being, according to a report published in the April 2012 issue of Journal of Adolescent Health. Children may not recall what they ate, but the memories of being together, without electronic interference, become ingrained.
* **Sharing experiences**. During shared mealtimes, children and parents share their experiences, observations and ideas, hopes and dreams. Additionally, mealtime conversations expand children’s language skills, thus enhancing their reading abilities.
* **Learning about each other**. Being together **at a table** can be a relaxing time for each family member to [share their best and worst experiences of the day](http://blogs.brighthorizons.com/familyroom/day-tips-getting-children-talk/).
* **Contributing**. The planning and preparation of meals and cleaning up afterward presents meaningful opportunities for your [family to work together](https://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/2013-chores-how-to-involve-your-child/). Relationships are enhanced when siblings or a child and parent work side-by-side to discuss menus, shop, prepare food, and finally sit down together. Everyone’s contribution is meaningful.
* **Establishing routines**. The routine of family meals can provide a sense of security and a feeling of belonging in the family. Furthermore, children thrive on predictability—knowing what will happen and when.
* **Developing healthy eating habits**. Typically, home-prepared meals include more protein, vitamins and fiber, and less saturated fat, sugar and sodium than restaurant or take-out food. Children learn to eat a variety of healthy foods by being exposed to them early in life. Families have differing opinions about [how to encourage children to eat nutritious foods](https://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/2012-how-to-get-children-to-try-new-foods/), but common to all is that they need to be offered, and enjoyed by other family members.

But merely understanding the benefits of family meals does not help busy parents get nutritious food to the table. It is important to be sure you are preparing quality meals for everyone.

## Healthy Family Dinner Tips

* **Plan and shop for food once weekly**. Having the food on hand saves time and energy.
* **Have nutritious snacks available**. Children (and many adults) may get irritable and impatient when hungry. Stock the kitchen with vegetable sticks, fresh fruits, nuts, and low-fat cheeses.
* **Keep meals simple**. Summer salads or winter stews can contain ingredients that meet a variety of nutritional requirements.
* **Use a slow cooker**. Start the slow cooker before leaving the house in the morning and come home to a delicious, well-balanced meal.
* **Get your**[**children involved in the preparation of meals**](https://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/2011-batter-up-cooking-with-children/). Young children might wash vegetables, fold napkins, or mash potatoes. Not only does contribution foster competence, a sense of belonging and self-worth, but it may also help get the food to the table sooner.
* **Cook large portions on weekends**. When preparing meals, its easy to prepare double or triple portions, and freeze food for busy nights.
* **Purchase nutritious pre-made meals**. On nights when you don’t have time to prepare a meal, purchase nutritious take-out or frozen food (read the labels for ingredients), and at least sit at the table together.
* **Make family meals fun**. Focus on relaxing and enjoying each other. Keep conversations to positive and neutral topics; meals are an opportunity for authentic engagement.
* **Don’t be hard on yourself**. Sometimes family meals are just not possible, and thats okay.

Eating together as a family is more than possible. Start by designating a few days a week to eat together, then, over time, plan even more family shared meals. Many of us focus on dinner time only, but they can also include family weekday breakfasts or weekend brunches. Bon appetite—and enjoy your family!

**How Children Can Learn & Benefit from Family Style Meals**

Family style meals at Bright Horizons classrooms help with child development. See the benefits of family style meals and how to improve your family's meals.

In many early childhood classrooms you will often see meals served "family style." Children and teachers sit together at tables, serve themselves from child-size platters, pour drinks from small pitchers, and share thoughts and experiences as they eat.

When spills and splatters occur, children (with teachers' guidance) wipe them up. Before the meal, children help set the table and afterwards, clean their own area. Parents sometimes wonder, "What's the magic? Why does my child eat at the table so calmly in school, but at home I have to cajole her to just sit down and then beg her to eat healthy foods?"

There is no "magic" but family style dining helps with child development as it connotes everyone sitting together at a table, serving themselves, and sharing thoughts. Normally, the atmosphere is calm and promotes unity. Self-service fosters independence and empowers children to feel in control of their choices, thus eliminating power struggles. Teachers and children encourage one another to try different foods.

**How Child Development Improves with Family Style Meals**

* Children [learn cooperation and social skills](http://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/teaching-children-to-care-and-be-more-cooperative/) as they practice patience by sharing, passing platters, taking turns, waiting, and using appropriate language and manners.
* It helps develop language skills as they engage in teacher or other student-inspired conversations, share the best and worst part of their day, play word games, make up stories, or discuss current events relevant to their age group.
* Family style dining expands fine motor skills as children serve themselves, learn to hold flatware, and pour their own beverages.
* Children learn mathematical skills, including spatial relationships and one-to-one correspondence, e.g., sorting and counting the flatware, setting the table, or placing the chairs.
* Dining together [deepens relationships and friendships](http://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/2012-helping-your-child-make-friends/) in a relaxed atmosphere where children can focus on one another without outside distractions.

After visiting a classroom, parents might wonder how family style meals can happen at home. Here are a few family meal tips from child care centers and preschools that you can do at home to help with your child's development:

* Resist the temptation to pre-fill your child's plate.
* Instead, try some child-sized bowls, serving utensils or pitchers. Children can use plastic tongs or a large spoon to serve and plastic measuring cups with a spout to pour.
* Encourage everyone to sit down together and one-at-a-time share something good about their day.

In reality, we're replicating what many families already do. Think about [enlisting your child's help to prepare a meal](http://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/2011-batter-up-cooking-with-children/), dine together and clean up afterwards. With no electronic interference, you'll discuss their day, as well as model manners and appropriate interactions.