

# Eight Benefits of Family Mealtime

When was the last time your family sat down and enjoyed a meal together? It can be tough to make family mealtimes happen with conflicting parental work schedules and children's school and extra-curricular activities across the island. Making time for family meals may seem impossible at times, but research now shows that eating together can benefit every member of the family.

The very act of preparing a meal that everyone will sit down and eat, tends to lead to healthier choices all around. A study of 4,746 middle and high school students in the US,

with diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, found that children whose families eat together most days of the week consume more fruits and vegetables and less soda than children who rarely or never eat dinner with their families. Further, a Harvard study found that children who eat with their families are also more likely to eat low-fat foods and have significantly higher intake of dietary fiber and essential vitamins and minerals. More importantly, these children are more likely to make healthy food choices on their own when away from home, and will develop a lifelong habit of choosing healthy foods.

Aside from the many physical health benefits of family mealtimes, there are mental health benefits as well. For example, another Harvard study found that adolescents who eat dinner with their families are less likely to suffer from extreme eating behaviors such as purging, bingeing, and excessive dieting.

Here are eight more reasons why you should try to arrange family mealtimes 5-6 times a week - whether for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

## Benefit #1: Improved Communication and Bonding

Improved communication is one of the top benefits of family mealtime. Family mealtime provides the opportunity for everyone to engage in conversation and update each other of the days' events. Such conversations foster family bonding and unity, and enable members to share information, connect, laugh and learn from one another. It is suggested that mealtime communication with the TV turned off and everyone sitting in one place strengthens the family bond and can strengthen a child's sense of self-worth. Establishing a routine of family dinners gives children more opportunities to talk with their parents on a regular basis.

## Benefit #2: Opportunity to Model Manners and Etiquette

Family mealtime provides the perfect opportunity to model, teach and practice appropriate table manners, meal etiquette, and social skills. It should not, however, become another class, as the mealtime atmosphere should be kept light, relaxed, and loving. Table manners and etiquette are best taught by modeling!





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### **Benefit #3: Opportunity to Expand Your Child's Food Repertoire**

Family mealtimes also enable you to introduce and encourage your children to try new foods, without forcing, coercing, or bribing them. New foods are best introduced gradually along with some of the stand-by favorites. Be patient - it can take 8-10 exposures to a new food before it is accepted. Trying a new food expands your child's knowledge, experience, and skill, so make it fun by:

- Introducing foods from other cultures and countries
- Encouraging your child to pick a new fruit or vegetable from the supermarket, or better still, a local farmer's market
- Assisting your child to grow a new herb, fruit or vegetable

- Asking your child to select a new recipe from a cookbook, magazine or website (e.g. [www.lets-move.gov/eat-healthy](http://www.lets-move.gov/eat-healthy))
- Keeping cultural roots alive by sharing family favorites

### **Benefit #4: Improved Nutrition**

Research has shown that meals that are prepared and eaten at home are usually more nutritious and healthy as they contain more fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, along with additional nutrients such as fiber, calcium, vitamins A and C, and folate. Research has also shown that there is a lower consumption of soda and sweetened beverages at the dinner table. In addition,

### **Benefit #5: Opportunity to Learn Life-skills**

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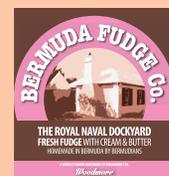
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prepare meals in order to prepare and eat regular, nutritious meals and snacks when they leave home. We must take the time to teach our children and involve them in menu planning, grocery shopping, basic cooking, baking, and food preparation as these are necessary life skills. For example, your preschooler can tear lettuce, cut bananas, and set the table, while older children can pour milk, peel vegetables, and mix batter.

By the time they are teens, they should be able to bake, grill and prepare basic meals. Involving your children in meal preparation can reduce meal prep time and can also make all family members more responsible and accepting of the meal! You can also reduce the stress of meal planning by creating a weekly plan and shopping list at the start of the week, and involving the whole family in the process by assigning each family member

for a specific task of the meal preparation or for the day's menu, including selecting healthy recipes. Getting children involved may also spark their interest in trying new foods and recipes.

### Benefit #6: Prevention of Destructive Behaviors

Research shows that frequent family dinners (i.e. five or more a week), are associated with lower rates of smoking, drinking, and illegal drug use in pre-teens and teenagers when compared to families that eat together two or fewer times per week. If family schedules prevent everyone from being home at dinnertime, then try to have family breakfasts instead. Waking up earlier may not be fun at first, but the benefits are worth the effort!

### Benefit #7: Improvement of Grades

Research shows that children improve their vocabulary and do better in school when they eat more meals with their parents and family. A Columbia University study determined that teenagers who eat dinner four or more times per week with their families have shown higher academic performance compared with teenagers who eat with their families two or fewer times per week.

### Benefit #8: Saves Money

Meals prepared at home tend to cost two to four times less than meals purchased at restaurants. Western lifestyles tend to lead to families eating out several times each week due to scheduling, commitments, and activities, resulting in the restaurant industry's 46% share of the total food dollar.

The idea of a family mealtime seems so simple, but consistently making it happen can be anything but simple. It's a good idea for the family to discuss and make a list of mealtime rules, such as no TV, no electronic devices at the table, and no complaints about the meal. This will enable you to share mealtimes together, easing day-to-day conflicts, as well as establishing traditions and memories that can last a lifetime.

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