The Science of Family Meal Time: A Child and Family Development Perspective

This lesson focuses on applying the science of meal times to help you and your family get the most benefit from eating together.

Why focus on family meal time?

There are multiple reasons to focus on family meals. Family meals are linked to children having better eating habits across their lifespans. Family meals occurring more often (more than five times per week) are linked to better mood and better mental health from ages 6 to 10.

Teens who regularly have meals with their families are less likely to get into fights, think about suicide, smoke, drink, and use drugs. They are also more likely to delay sexual activity and have higher academic achievement than adolescents who do not.

For teens, frequent family meals predict lower substance use rates, fewer depressive symptoms, fewer suicidal thoughts, and better grades. Children under 13 also have fewer behavioral problems, and fewer emotional outbursts when they have more frequent family meals. Adolescents — especially girls — who had frequent and structured family meals and a positive atmosphere at family meals were shown to be less likely to have disordered eating.

Adults engaged in the family meal times also receive the benefits in terms of social and emotional well-being. In short, there is a tremendous and wide-ranging body of knowledge supporting the importance of family meal times as beneficial for all involved.

What is "family meal time"?

Family and fictive kin

Family meal time can be defined as a time when those we consider as part of our family share a meal together.

Family can include blood relatives, adoptive and/or foster children, and fictive kin. Fictive kin is usually defined as, "non-biological family members." To put this in real terms, think of the "uncle" or "aunt" many people are to you and your friends' children. You might not be actually related by blood, but there is a high likelihood that many of these fictive aunts and uncles will see your children more often than their actual blood relatives. These fictive kin relationships often serve important functional and emotional roles for the members of the family. In this lesson, any time we refer to family, we include fictive kin. We recognize that the "parent" role can be fulfilled by non-blood relatives and/or blood relatives who are not actually parents.

Meal time

Meal time, likewise, is broad, and does not require a sit-down meal. Meal time can be breakfast, lunch/dinner, supper/dinner, or any other time when families engage in the act of preparing and/or eating meals. A picnic counts as a family meal time even though it is outdoors, on the ground, and in public, no table required. Sharing meal time can also include the planning, preparing, and serving of meals. Limiting meal time to simply eating for your health

ignores the processes that science and culture show are important.

Great! I want to have family meal time, what do I need to know?

Scheduling

There are many factors to consider when planning family meals, but the most important is asking, "When will my family be available to share a meal?" Thinking about family meal time as only the evening meal limits you. For many families, the only time they will be together might be in the morning before everyone heads off to school, work, or other activities. What's more, meal times can be different on different days of the week. When scheduling meal times, the most important part is to be as flexible and intentional as possible.

Conversations

From a child and adolescent development view, conversations are the mental nutrients to go along with the physical nutrients of eating. Positive conversations with your families set the foundation for conversations outside of the family. Family is where members learn and practice behavior, vocabulary, values, beliefs, customs, and rituals. Family meal times reinforce these through conversations.

Preparing for meal time conversations: Being intentional and scaffolding

Meal time conversations do not always happen without help. Adults can be most effective with children of all ages by being intentional and scaffolding the conversation.

Being intentional

One challenge many adults face when preparing and serving meals is the desire to meet the basic need of nutrition for the family. Eating nutritious food is important to our bodies and minds. However, if nutrition were the only goal, there would be no point in eating together. The benefits of family meal times come from meeting the need for food and fulfilling the need to engage with others. By intentionally preparing and serving healthy food, and focusing on the importance of family interactions during this time, adults can truly make family meal time a long-term benefit for themselves and their families.

Mindfulness

Being present and in-the-moment is important during family meal times. Before your family begins meal time, take a few seconds to be mindful of what you want to achieve through your meal. This will be hard at first. You might even think, "I just want to make it through!" Given what you now know about how important shared meal times are, starting out with the idea of initiating a conversation will help. You will still make it through the meal, but you will also be engaged in building family strengths. By taking a few seconds to think about what you want to accomplish and how to do that, you will have taken the first successful step.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a process to help people learn. The term is based on a construction scaffold, which is used before the building (in this case, knowledge) is solid. Once the building is solid, the scaffolding is no longer necessary, and it can be used in new construction. While there are many ways to scaffold your conversations, some helpful strategies to consider for shared meal times include: asking questions, providing information, modeling, providing feedback, maintaining interest, and setting the stage.

Asking questions. Open-ended questions are the best way to get more than yes-or-no answers. By asking open-ended questions you give others the opportunity to think and then provide more information. If you get "I don't know," then you can ask for a guess, or even ask what is known. The key with questions is to use them in moderation, as nobody likes to be interrogated.

Providing information. Another way to build conversation is to provide new information. The parents and the child can both learn new knowledge. The technique works across age groups, as you tell each other about your days, talk about the latest news, or just contribute something to the conversation.

Modeling. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the scaffolding process. During meal times, parents model that family time is important, and that eating is something to do together. The things you talk about reflect culture, values, and beliefs. Remember you are always modeling for your family what it means to be, for example, a mom, a partner,

a caregiver, and a person. As you share the meal, you are also modeling making healthy food choices, respectful manners and behaviors, and household responsibilities. For example, asking your child, "Hunter, would you please pass the broccoli?" both demonstrates a respectful way of asking for food and signals that you like broccoli, a healthy food.

Providing feedback. Using the word "because" is the best way to provide feedback. Many activities associated with family meal time require giving and receiving feedback. This can be encouragement such as "great job setting the table, because I know that sometimes you don't want to do it." Something like, "I saw you reach across the table. Next time you need something from the other side of the table, please ask us to pass it to you, because then you get what you need without reaching across the table, which is not polite, (or is disrespectful to the others at the table)" would be a positive way of providing feedback that can be easily understood.

Maintaining focus. This can be difficult, especially for families with adolescents and young children, as sometimes attention is hard to maintain. Most importantly, everyone should avoid using a screen at a meal, and this includes television. Screens are not inherently harmful, but they have been shown to dramatically limit conversation, and family meals are beneficial because of conversations. If you find one of your family members starting to mentally drift, be intentional in asking a question, or addressing a statement toward him or her. For example, "Bobby, I saw the coolest shirt in Jerry's shop today! It was a tie-dye and I loved the colors" can bring Bobby right back into the moment.

Setting the stage. This is an opportunity to help everyone know what to expect. By providing structure and mentally setting the stage for everyone, you can share the time together with an understanding of how things will go. This can include some ground rules like "no playing with toys during meal time," or "when we are done, it is Phil and Mickey's turn to clean up." These simple steps help manage expectations and focus your family as they prepare for meal time.

Division of Responsibility in Feeding

Ellyn Satter's Feeding Dynamics Model and perspectives on feeding a family provide useful division of responsibilities for different developmental ages. For feeding infants, the parent is responsible for what is fed (formula or breast milk) and the infant is responsible for how much is eaten. During the transition to solid foods, the parent is still responsible for what is fed, and begins to be responsible for when and where the child eats. The child is still and will always be responsible for both how much or whether to eat the foods provided.

Adults' feeding responsibilities:

- Choosing what is fed; buying and preparing food.
- Providing regular and nutritious meals and snacks.
- Making eating times pleasant.

- » Modeling how to behave at family mealtime.
- » Being considerate of children's lack of food experience without surrendering to their preferences.
- » Avoid allowing children to have food or beverages (except for water) between meal and snack times.
- » Letting children grow up with bodies that are healthy and appropriate for their unique needs.

Children's eating responsibilities:

- » Children will eventually eat.
- » They will eat the amount and what they need by listening to their bodies.
- » They will learn to eat the food their parents eat.
- » They will grow in predictable ways.
- » They will learn to behave appropriately at mealtime.

What does this look like in a meal setting? By honoring the child's responsibility to eat what and how much of the food provided, the parent allows the child to refuse an item, to eat more of another item, and to stop eating when his or her instincts say to stop. If parents avoid trying to control a child's eating, the child will learn from his mistakes and adjust for those mistakes later. A competent eater is developing, and positive parenting paves the way.

In summary, family meal times provide opportunities for intentionally building connections that we know are beneficial for all family members. We encourage you to be creative in thinking about family meals in every aspect from the when, where, and what of the food to how, why, and who of conversations. Your time together as a family makes a difference.

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