



the power of family meals

Want to really connect with your kids? Sit. Eat. Talk. It matters more than you think.

Forget for a moment about dance, piano, football, and band. If you want to help your kids be successful and happy, make family mealtimes the highlight of their day.

A recent study at the University of Michigan suggests that eating meals together produces dramatic results, says Julie Baumgardner, executive director of First Things First, a nonprofit Tennessee organization dedicated to building stronger families. "More mealtime with the family was the single strongest predictor of better achievement scores and better behavior," she says, "even better than time spent studying and going to church."

SLOW DOWN AND CONNECT

Regular family meals forge the connections kids crave, offering a time to listen, laugh, ponder opinions, solve problems together, and show appreciation. "Mealtime also provides a pivotal opportunity for parents to be



good role models," notes Rachel Brandeis, an Atlanta-based spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "At the table, children learn everything from healthy eating habits to social skills and manners."

SPARK GOOD CONVERSATION

While it's important to talk through events and activities, make time for open-ended questions as well. "Tell us about the best part of your day" is a good place to start. "What was something interesting you learned this week?" is another.

Getting the whole family together for dinner can be a challenge when schedules conflict. If that's your story, look to creative alternatives. That's

Relax and enjoy. Share some laughs, too. Table time's a great chance to keep learning about each other.

what Victoria Smith of Athens, Georgia, did when her son Tycho began playing team sports. "I always approach sports seasons with trepidation; I know we'll need to give up some relaxed meals," Smith says. "We work around that by packing a dinner for after the game, sitting down early for dinner, or eating out as a treat."

If late home arrivals are a problem, then dessert—even breakfast—can become your family's table time.

The bottom line is that family mealtime magic has nothing to do with what you serve or when. What really matters is that you use your table time to talk openly, reconnect, and enjoy each other's company. ■

(focus on what matters)

To fully enjoy family time at the table, get rid of distractions.

Kids know that eye contact means you're listening, so clear away newspapers and save the mail for another time. Unplug the phone and turn off the TV as well. Kicking the news-watching habit improved mealtimes for the Moffatt family of Coral Springs, Florida. "Now the boys know that when the TV goes off, we'll be eating supper," says mom Lorri Gail.

"Dinnertime's a shift in the day and a good time to regroup."

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FAMILY DAY: A DAY TO EAT DINNER WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Enjoying a meal together is all you have to do to join this national celebration organized by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. For details, check out www.casafamilyday.org.