

FAMILY DINNERS: A HEALTHY TRADITION

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

“La Rentrée” or the re-entry refers to the period at the end of summer in France, typically in early September, when people return to work and students go back to school after a long, hot summer. It's the time to get back to work with a burst of energy, as well as to go back to healthy habits. While we don't have a fancy name for it in the US, we all feel that “back-to-school” energy, even if we don't currently have kids in school. September feels like a fresh start, almost like a new year. Think of it as a “clean slate” and a chance to start new healthy habits or readopt the ones that have slipped over the summer.

Make Family Dinners a Habit

One of the ways you can get back to healthy habits is family mealtimes. There is over three decades worth of research on family meals and the science is pretty clear on the wide-ranging benefits!

So, what are the benefits of family dinners?

- Better nutrition with healthier food choices, as well as better portion control for the whole family, not just the kids.
- Encourages longer time spent at the table, which means kids are more likely to eat more fruits and vegetables, as well as try new foods.
- Better for your budget - planning meals in advance cuts down on last-minute takeout orders.
- Provides opportunities for family members to talk about their day and share experiences leading to stronger family bonds.
- When routinely eating together with a parent or other family member, kids have better grades, better vocabulary, higher self-esteem, and a decreased risk of drug use, eating disorders, and anxiety/depression.

How to Make it Happen

Despite all the clear benefits, it can feel harder than ever for busy families to gather around the table. What's the recipe for making family mealtimes easier?

Here are some suggestions:

- Schedule it and make it a priority. It doesn't have to be dinner every single night -maybe you aim for 2-3 dinners during the week and one on the weekend. It can be breakfast before school, or even a snack together after dinner.
- Meals don't need to be long and don't need to involve the whole family every time. Maybe it's a child and parent or two kids sitting down together.
- Make it enjoyable! Mealtime is not the time to discuss touchy subjects or scold kids about grades. Share some corny jokes or stories from the day. Include some family rituals such as Taco Tuesdays or Pancake Saturdays every week. Conversation starter cards can also be helpful for rituals such as Rose, Thorn, and Bud. (Rose is what went well in the day, thorn is something you struggled with, and bud is something you are looking forward to.)
- Try not to get into power struggles. As a parent you are responsible for providing the structure for mealtimes, as well as what is served at the meal. Your child is responsible for what and how much to eat. Try to avoid negotiating or using food as a reward. If your child decides not to eat, don't be a short-order cook! There is another opportunity to eat at the next meal. This is hard, I know, but it gets easier with practice!
- “Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” Don't worry too much about making the perfect dinner. Maybe you buy a rotisserie chicken and put a quick salad together. Or throw some salmon and veggies on a sheet pan for a quick dinner with minimal clean-up.
- Get some easy 30-minute dinners on rotation that you know are family favorites. Make use of a slow cooker and make extra to freeze for future meals.



- Involve the kids in meal preparation and cleanup! Cooking is a life skill and preparing meals together helps kids learn kitchen skills.
- Turn off the electronics. Shut the TV off (studies show this is associated with better family interactions and lower obesity rates) and leave cell phones off of the table as well. This gives kids a better opportunity to talk and participate as well as a chance to be heard.
- Make it easy! Grocery delivery can be a big timesaver, especially if you don't enjoy grocery shopping.

Share With a Friend

While family meals are great, it's good to remember that shared meals are also important if you live by yourself. Loneliness isn't just a feeling; it's a health risk. Studies show that feeling isolated can also lead to an increased risk for heart disease, stroke, and depression as well as unhealthy eating habits like skipping meals, overeating, or relying on highly processed foods for meals.

Start simple: invite a friend over for a casual meal or host a potluck dinner where everyone brings something. Remember, it doesn't matter so much what you serve, and the house doesn't need to be perfect - people just really like to be invited and to get together! Other ideas include a monthly cooking club, like a book club where you rotate houses to host but instead of reading books, you try new recipes. Try out some cooking classes in your community. Even a virtual meal shared via video call can be a great way to connect with family and friends who live far away.

Whether with family or with friends, shared meals foster not only good nutrition for your body but also good nutrition to fill your heart. So, set the table and let the laughter and conversation flow!

DINNER DISCUSSIONS

Great conversations make mealtimes memorable. Here are some questions to get the chatter going at the table!

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| What's something funny that happened today? | If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why? | If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go? | What's something new you learned recently? |
| What historical figure would you invite to dinner? | What is your favorite memory from a family vacation? | If you could switch places with one family member for a day, who would it be? | What is your favorite book or movie and why? |
| What are you looking forward to this month? | Describe your perfect day. | What is your favorite holiday? | Describe today in three words. |
| What is the best gift you have ever received? | What is a hobby or activity you would like to try? | If you could be famous for one thing, what would it be? | If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be? |



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