

## Bring back the family meal!

How did we let it come to this? How did we let the fast food mentality steal one of the great American traditions, the family meal? It was the one time we could all count on being in the same place at the same time, each of us faithfully taking our personal spot at the table and discussing our days to the backdrop of clinking plates and gently shifting chairs. And it was more than just eating, wasn't it? It was a family staying connected in every way that's important. Why were we so willing to hand that over to the likes of Mickey D?

Now we can never go back... Hey, wait a sec. Sure we can.

We might be a little rusty at first, but with a little practice we can get the magic back. We still have all the ingredients. A family. A table. The need to eat. Of course it won't be exactly the same food-wise, because we've made such great strides in healthy eating. We'll be passing smaller portions. Not so many second helpings. But besides that, everything will come together just the way it used to. And just in case anyone still needs a little more incentive, take note here what research has discovered about the benefits of families eating together:

- They eat more nutritiously.
- Children have improved character and social development.
- Teens have better grades and are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs.
- Family communications improve.
- Family traditions get stronger.
- Childhood obesity decreases.

It's a safe bet after reading *that* amazing list that we're all on board with family meals now. However, reality being what it is, we still have to deal with the busy schedules that got us away from them in the first place. So, how do we balance eating family meals together with our busy schedules and children's activities? Check out these ideas below and make family meals a priority. It's well worth the effort.

- Check everyone's schedule and look for realistic adjustment opportunities. Then plan for family meal times accordingly.
- It doesn't have to be dinner. How about breakfast or a weekend brunch?
- It doesn't always have to happen at home. It can happen at a restaurant, too. (The important thing is to spend time together.)
- Plan menus ahead. Choose which days to cook and which days to pull something quick from the freezer. Shop for the whole week at one time.

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Keep it simple. You could also plan a month's worth of menus at a time, and then repeat it. We've included a few recipe ideas below.

- Make it quick. Use crock-pots, frozen meal kits, and simple recipes to keep meals from becoming a major production. Prep food ahead of time when possible. Keep your pantry well stocked so you have everything for a nutritious meal.
- Do not get in the habit of fixing a different meal for each family member. If your picky eater does not like what you are having, consider allowing him to have an alternative two times each week.
- Turn off cell phones, TVs, radios and other distractions. The idea is to connect with each other.
- Keep conflict and discipline away from the dinner table. Encourage each family member to contribute polite conversation. Listen to thoughts and views. Get to know what others in your family think about a variety of topics.
- Get every family member involved in some aspect of the meal, whether it's planning, shopping, cooking, setting the table or doing the dishes.

As promised, we'll leave you with a few smart and easy recipe ideas for your family meals. Ready to start reclaiming this precious tradition for your family? There's no better time to start than now. Whatever effort it takes will pay off big time. And after a few weeks it will all become second nature. No, make that *first* nature. Because this is how we were meant to eat in the first place.

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