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Dining at Home is Better Than You Think!

By Sally G. Hoyle, Ph.D.

One of my favorite childhood memories is of my dad singing “Beans, beans the magical fruit, the more you eat the more you toot, the more you toot the better you feel so eat beans at every meal.” He knew all the verses and it made us giggle. Our family always ate dinner together. There were not many restaurants in the semi-rural area in which we lived, and no McDonald’s until I was in high school. Generally, I remember mealtime as a positive experience, but I also recall some pretty tense dinner hours when someone was in trouble or in a bad mood. We’re all still talking to one another, so I figure we worked these things out. What I have learned as a child psychologist with a background in child development is that family dinnertime can be a great way for parents to contribute to their child’s growth and development.

Let’s talk first about research on families are eating together. A 1998 study from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) found that teens from families that eat dinner together regularly were a whopping 31% less likely to abuse drugs. And adolescents from families that never ate dinner together were 72% more likely to engage in substance abuse activities. In another 1994 study, Lou Harris and Associates surveyed 2000 high school seniors, and found that students who ate dinner with their families regularly (4 or more times a week) scored better on a battery of academic tests. Psychologists like William Dougherty, Ph.D. say you are more likely to have a close relationship with your child if you spend more time with them. Wow, can suppertime be that powerful?

Yes, it is powerful enough that numerous politicians espouse "Family Day" when families eat dinner together. The National Pork Board established National Eat Dinner Together Week in 1996 to increase awareness of the benefits of family dinner. I bet you didn't know it is in October. Neither did I. What happened to family dinner anyway? More women work outside the home, kids participate in more activities, people watch more T.V., there are more take-out restaurants, more adolescents work due to our consumer culture and advances in kitchen technology make it easier for family members to prepare their own meals. So, how can you incorporate family dinner into your schedule?

We're busy, we don't have time for family dinner.

- Write 'dinner' on your schedule.
- Involve your children in the planning and preparation of meals.
- Turn off the T.V. and phone.
- If you never eat dinner together, it's a signal there are too many activities.
- Eat later to accommodate work schedules. Make sure the kids have a healthy snack so they can make it to dinner.
- Try to have dinner together most of the time if you can't manage every day.

What do we talk about at family dinner?

- Events of the day in school, at home or work.
- Upcoming family activities.
- Talk about something in the news. Steer clear of gruesome topics (i.e. murders) and focus on interesting scientific discoveries, human interest stories and world events.
- Tell your kids about positive aspects of your day. Fred Rogers once said in a speech that one of the best things you can do for your kids is do something you love and let them see you doing it.
- Compliment family members on their good manners or teach children manners as part of the meal. Correct table manners by saying something like, "If you were

invited to dinner at the White House/a fancy restaurant/with your favorite TV star would you want to hold the fork like that?"

- Bring up topics of interest to other family members like contemporary musicians, sports, etc.
- Tell a funny story. Your kids will follow suit.
- Discuss a problem a family member had that day.
- Have some family rules about conversation at the table. Everyone gets a turn to talk, no talking with food in your mouth, and so on.
- Avoid criticism or scolding at the table.

What's all this fuss about family dinner?

- Increased self-esteem. If your children help you to cook and plan meals, they will gain self-esteem from these skills. My kids cook side dishes or occasionally an entire meal and they are pleased with themselves when it is finished. I often ask them to help me out in the kitchen. As an added bonus, they will know how to cook by the time they are on their own.
- Improved nutrition. Nutritionists say that families who eat dinner regularly together have healthier eating patterns.
- Enhanced language and conversation skills. Your child will learn to make polite conversation, an important social skill. Research shows that young children who are exposed to conversation, like that at family dinner, have better vocabulary and verbal skills.
- Problem-solving skills. If your child helps with cooking, he or she is learning to follow directions on a package (or verbal directions from you), there is some math involved in preparing recipes, and they will use reading skills reading recipes or packages. What happens when you are missing an ingredient? Most cooks improvise, making a quick decision to substitute what is on hand. It's a great opportunity for problem-solving.
- Time management and stress management. A lot of cooking is time management, like when to put on the vegetables so they will be done with the rest of the meal.

Your child will also learn what to do about cooking mistakes and messes. What

do you do when you have spent a long time preparing a meal and it gets ruined?

You are teaching your child something about how to manage stress.

- Reduce the likelihood of risky adolescent behaviors like drug abuse by having time to talk to your adolescent on a regular basis.
- Help your child to maintain a healthy weight. You don't have to be a nutritionist to figure out that eating a healthy home-cooked meal is better than fast food.

Parents today are exposed to an enormous amount of information in the way of books, magazines, television and computer about how to be better parents. But this one is a no-brainer. There is no book to purchase, no special equipment to buy, and no extra expense. Figure out a way to eat dinner together more often. Find ways to savor one another's company. Get your kids helping you in the kitchen so they have opportunities to master new things. Chat about stuff. It's really that simple. And feel free to use the "Beans, beans the magical fruit..." song; it's sure to please.