

## **The Power of Family Mealtimes for Positive Mental Health and Well-Being in Children**

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Family mealtimes can have a substantial positive impact on children's development and not just their physical health, but their mental health too. In the last twenty years or so, there has been a lot of research on this topic with findings that support family mealtimes are linked to children earning better grades, learning better communication and conflict-solving skills, having increased self-esteem, lower risk for depression and anxiety, lower risk of teen pregnancy, lower likelihood of developing eating disorders, and decreased risk of substance use.

A good amount of this research on family mealtimes has come out of the Family Resiliency Center (FRC) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Not surprisingly, although nonetheless interesting, Pampered Chef, Ltd. founder and chairman, Doris Kelly Christopher, partnered with FRC to support the development of the Family Resiliency Program. This partnership was born out of concern for finding solutions to family problems.

Many other research organizations conducting studies on the benefits of family mealtimes have come to the same conclusion; children who routinely eat with their family are more likely to experience long term mental health benefits. Findings from The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, support that the dinner table provides a space for children to open up and talk as well as actively listen to the conversations around them. During these conversations, social connection with family members is strengthened buffering effects of risk factors in later adolescent years. This is a time when thoughts and feelings can be identified and explored in an emotionally secure environment.

Moreover, the experience of sharing a meal with family members provides vicarious learning opportunities. Language development is enhanced as children hear narratives with explanations communicated by family members. This experience builds children's vocabulary-even more than being read to-and enhances language in the preschool years which has been connected to stronger reading skills in grade school and high school. Better literacy skills result in better grades and students with better grades often times have higher self-esteem.

Although, family mealtimes may arguably be the most reliable way for families to connect, no doubt the biggest challenge is how do busy families fit family mealtimes into their schedule and moreover, how can they be successful? Problems such as work/life stress, picky eaters, sibling conflict, managing unwanted behaviors, and competing with screen time, are but some of the major stressors and hindrances to successful family mealtimes.

Dr. Anne K. Fishel, family therapist and professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School and co-founder of The Family Dinner Project explains, "If you consider family dinner as a time for nourishment, preventing problems, and boosting children's cognitive abilities, a nightly meal is an efficient use of time." From this vast body of research, organizations such as The Family Dinner Project and The Pampered Chef Family Resiliency Program developed considerable resources for families. Podcasts, newsletters, recipes, blog posts, and social media all supply families with an abundance of information to direct them in pursuing successful family mealtimes.

Being convinced that family mealtimes are good for mental health and well-being is not usually the issue for parents or caregivers when considering to implement or expand on more consistent family mealtimes, but blocking out the time is a huge challenge. Therefore, with time being a most precious commodity for families these days, here are some of practical suggestions that will lead to successful family mealtimes.

To begin, it goes without saying that the most successful family mealtimes will include putting electronics to rest during the meal. This is a challenge most worth the battle. Conversation has a tough time competing with the dopamine release that screens bring so set aside the electronics. It is best to avoid all distractions that might deter from building on time spent together and be present.

Next, understand that the food itself is not the focus. It is not necessary to go all Top Chef and create elaborate and expensive meals to have successful family mealtimes. Although, making a delicious meal from scratch absolutely has its benefits. This is an event that most likely is best saved for a weekend when more time is available. Planning out what you will have, going to the grocery, and preparation all supply a multitude of lessons for families and provide an enjoyable activity that can strengthen educational, cultural, and social development leading to more positive physical and mental health and well-being. That being said, quick meals can still offer these lessons.

Consider incorporating family mealtimes into your already scheduled activities. Children's activities like afterschool sports can include a meal in the park where the sport is taking place or even in the car. Pack a cooler with something simple or grab takeout. It's the time spent together that matters. Having a big meal at 3 o'clock before a game at six can be beneficial in many ways. Children can focus on the game without being hungry and are less cranky and moody once they get home. As well, think about the true importance of the activities. Although, sports are positive activities, the stress created from a too packed schedule may outweigh the all the good it's set to create.

In short, family mealtimes are well worth the investment of time. Occasions where parents and caregivers can create the platform for social connection and really be present for one another greatly enhances relationships. This attachment to loving and supportive humans is crucial to positive mental health development. It tells children and others in the family as well, I'm curious about you, I'm available to you, and you really matter. Remembering that time invested in a child's life will yield a huge pay-off as they grow into adulthood and potentially help to avoid problems with mental health and well-being later in life is key to successful family mealtimes.