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Power of family dinner

The table may be the last place parents can connect with children and pass on values and life skills

By Scott Westcott

No matter how hectic their lives, Rex and Marcia Kibler always tried to gather around the table to eat dinner with their three sons. Family dinner offered a time for the Kiblers to count their blessings, learn manners and values, and talk about the day.

"My wife and I decided a long time ago that our dinner table would be a place where our kids could talk about anything," says Rex Kibler, a pastor and longtime member of the **Kiwanis Club of Petoskey, Michigan**. "I think it takes a family deciding that this is going to be a priority. Sometimes you have to set aside the urgent for what's important."

With two sons now grown and a teenager at home, Rex points to those family meals as critical in raising healthy, well-adjusted kids. And research backs him up. Studies have shown that children of families that eat together are "not as apt to experiment with risky behavior" such as drug use and premarital sex, says Mimi Doe, who conducted thousands of teen interviews for her upcoming book, *Nurturing Your Teenager's Soul*.

A review of studies by Tufts University found more than 80 percent of parents thought eating with their children was "extremely important." Yet fewer than 50 percent of those surveyed actually sat down with their children to dinner on a regular basis.

Therein lies the challenge. For generations, eating dinner as a family was a given. But in an increasingly fast-paced world with both parents often working and kids' schedules rivaling that of a busy CEO, family dinnertime often takes a backseat. Yet by making it a priority, parents can find ways to connect with their kids over the table.

"You could talk about the subject of family dinner and four hours later still not exhaust all the implications," says Corinne Gregory, founder of

How often does your family eat together?

What strategies do you use to gather them around the same table?

Share your favorite quick and easy family dinner recipe.

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Less cooking, more talking

These cookbooks can help families de-emphasize meal preparation so they can concentrate on family conversations.

The Working Parents Cookbook: More Than 200 Recipes for Great Family Meals

by Jeff and Jodie Morgan

- ⌘ Written by husband and wife team
- ⌘ Brief primer on healthy eating, shopping, and stocking the kitchen
- ⌘ Time- and money-saving tips throughout

Desperation Dinners: Home-Cooked Meals for Frantic Families in 20 Minutes Flat

by Beverly Mills and Alicia Ross

- ⌘ More than 250 20-minute recipes
- ⌘ A list of convenience

The Polite Child, a Washington-state based company that provides manners and etiquette curriculum for schools. “For children, that time at the table can affect everything.”

STARTING A ROUTINE

For families striving to establish a dinnertime routine, Doe suggests aiming for at least three sit-down meals together each week. The emphasis should be on time spent together, not on creating an elaborate home-cooked meal.

“The first thing is to let go of the idea that this is going to be like *The Waltons*,” Doe says. “Your kid isn’t going to remember the chocolate soufflé. He’s going to remember that mealtime was when he was loved and heard and part of this team called family.”

Doe suggests some simple rules to make the most of the dinner: Let the phone ring, turn off the television, and make sure children have the opportunity to participate in the conversation.

Parents also can talk with their children about ways to make the meal special or sacred. Simply lighting a few candles often does the trick. “For whatever reason candles tend to help people open up—and it seems to especially be the case for boys,” Doe says.

For children who are reticent to talk about their day, try establishing a routine in which every family member tells one good thing that happened to them that day.

“Don’t think your kids are too old or too sophisticated to do stuff like this,” Doe says. “They may make a face, they may roll their eyes but if you forget to light the candle on the fifth night, guess who will ask to light it? The adolescent.”

AN EARLY START

It’s never too early to start mealtime rituals and routines, says Dan M. Sandifer-Stech, who chairs the department of human sciences and design at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. Parents of younger children should evaluate every six months or so if their dinner routine is keeping their children engaged. That means asking plenty of questions and saving much of the “adult conversation” for when the children are tucked into bed.

“When you make the time for family dinner you’re sending the message this is something sacred and important,” says Sandifer-Stech. “Like a lot of things in family life, it’s easier to start early. It’s difficult to roll in one day and tell your 13-year-old now we’re spending some family time.”

foods and pantry staples

⚡ Vegetarian dishes

The Weeknight Survival Cookbook: How to Make Healthy Meals in 10 Minutes
by **Dena Irwin**

⚡ 12 weeks of recipes for healthful dishes

⚡ Shopping lists

⚡ Easily modified recipes

A Dinner a Day: Complete Meals in Minutes for Every Weeknight of the Year
by **Sally Sondheim and Sazannah Sloan**

⚡ More than 1,000 recipes

⚡ 267 complete meals

365 Quick, Easy and Inexpensive Dinner Menus
by **Penny E. Stone**

⚡ combines nutrition, ease of preparation, and cost-efficiency.

⚡ multi-indexed by food category and by preparation time.

The Rush Hour Cook's Weekly Wonders: 19 Weekly Dinner Menus Complete with Grocery Lists for Today's Busy Family
by **Brook Noel**

⚡ written by a CEO, mom, wife, daughter, volunteer, church-goer, author, and speaker.

⚡ “No list of ingredients shall be longer than the instructions.”

⚡ weekly menus included.

Saving Dinner: The Menus, Recipes, and Shopping Lists

As children get older, it's important to get them involved with the planning and cooking of meals to help convey a sense of responsibility and teamwork.

"Cooking can be side by side, shoulder-to-shoulder work, and that can be a good way to open up communication," Sandifer-Stech says. "A lot of conversation can happen in the process of working together, and a lot of playfulness too."

MANNERS MATTER

Parenting experts, such as Gregory of The Polite Child, are convinced that time at the family dinner table can be the best defense against the problems facing many youth. The basic civility and manners learned at the table can teach kids to handle themselves and treat others with respect, she says.

"By sitting at the table and learning manners, children also are learning the world doesn't revolve around them," Gregory says.

Gregory says that an increasing number of young adults graduating from college are not yet "housebroken"—meaning they lack the basic social skills and manners to succeed in the world.

"The biggest thing you can do for your kids is give them the tools to be socially adept," she says. "That means being able to get through any social interaction without embarrassing yourself."

Still, Gregory stresses mealtime shouldn't become a rigid finishing school. She suggests parents focus on positive behavior and "catch their children doing something right."

And as kids' lives get busier and more complicated, Gregory is convinced the dinner table may be the last place parents can regularly connect with their children and pass on values and life skills. With three sons who grew up around the family dinner table, Rex agrees.

"When else are you going to spend that kind of time?" he says. "You're certainly not going to detect how kids are doing when everyone is engaged with a television or computer screen. Eating together gives kids a sense of belonging."

to Bring Your Family Back to the Table

by Leanne Ely

- ✦ written by a certified nutritionist.
- ✦ divided by season.
- ✦ side dish suggestions for entrees.

Frantic Family Cookbook: Mostly Healthy Meals in Minutes

by Leanne Ely

- ✦ fun, humorous, and sprinkled with tips and kitchen insight.
- ✦ recipes are tasty, quick, and mostly healthy, with the added benefit of being cost-conscious.

The What's-For-Dinner Cookbook: 52 Weeks of Balanced Dinners for Your Family

by Kathleen Botta and Claire Mendonca

- ✦ based on seasons, the book provides five days of planned, well-balanced dinners for each week.
- ✦ most of the recipes can be prepared in 30 minutes or less.
- ✦ presented in such a way that leftovers can be included in meals planned for later in a week.

Better Than Take-Out (and Faster, Too)

by Pamela Marx and Matthew D. Wittmer

- ✦ how to make a good dinner out of whatever you have in the house
- ✦ tips to make food preparation quicker.

Beyond Macaroni and Cheese

by Mary Beth Lagerborg and Karen J. Parks

- ✎ recipes submitted and tested by MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) groups across the United States.
- ✎ includes ways to involve kids in meal preparation.
- ✎ complete with family prayers and scriptures.



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