

The surprising power of family meals

If your family is currently not eating together, set the goal of one meal per week. If they are already doing it, suggest that they do so with more verve and intention. Educate yourself on the overwhelming benefits of the family meal for children and parents alike. Practice it in your own home so that you, too, may know the magic of



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this simple act. Family meals are a small change that is accessible and manageable for just about anyone.

In Miriam Weinstein's book, "The Surprising Power of Family Meals," I was reminded of how important this "ritual" truly is. Family meals have been associated with a lower incidence of teenage drug and alcohol use, lower teen pregnancy rates and

decreased risk for both obesity and eating disorders. At the same time, they are also tied to getting better grades, better reading readiness in kindergarteners and increased resilience in kids. Surprising, huh?

It seems that family meals help kids learn what constitutes a "reasonable" meal in terms of nutrition and portion size. But, overwhelmingly, the benefits of the family meal come from the almost ridiculously simple act of just sitting together, sharing the same food and facing each other.

Relationships become enriched by reflecting on the day's activities, accomplishments and what is coming up for tomorrow. Delving in and talking, sharing stories, creating opportunities for further bonding. Most times, it's not about the food but more about the time together. What else could your family do together on a regular basis? Cleaning the house? Making dinner?

Mealtimes are a great opportunity to support STEM learning, as one example. You can talk about STEM ideas and use STEM words as you feed or talk with your child as they start trying solid foods (right around 6 months).

Children can learn about quantity ("One more bite!"), volume ("This cup has more milk."), sequencing ("First eat the banana, then a Cheerio."), physical properties ("It is too hot. My ice cream is melting!") and plants ("Carrots grow in the ground, but apples grow on trees.")

Children learn new things when they practice them in everyday routines. Try one or two of the following activities during mealtimes. With a little bit of practice, mealtime can become a natural place to talk and learn about STEM. Use these ideas to set up the environment and materials to best suit your child's needs.

Kristin Saxena, Board Certified Pediatrician, "The Surprising Power of Family Meals" September 2, 2021, BabyTalk from Camille Catlett

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