



LOVE notes

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Family Meals Are Great for Kids

You come home after a long work day, thinking about what to make for dinner. Your daughter is in the kitchen already working on hers. The ding from the microwave announces that the frozen something-or-other is warmed and ready to eat. She puts it on a plate, says hi, and heads to her room to do homework. Your teenage son just finished basketball practice and is looking in the fridge, so hungry he's almost tempted to eat something good for him, like the carrot sticks or fruit you've left on a shelf in plain view. Instead he latches on to the pizza left over from last night's dinner and stuffs it in his mouth, not even bothering to heat it up. You shake your head, realizing that this is going to be another night of everyone on their own for food. Sound familiar? Maybe you'd like to sit down as a family and share a meal, at least once in awhile, but you don't know if your kids will go for it. Is it even worth it?

You bet it is! Here's why.

Better Nutrition

Children learn healthy eating habits from their parents. Professionals who study the importance of family mealtimes have found that children who participate in family meals eat more fruits, vegetables, healthy grains, and calcium-rich foods, and don't drink as many soft drinks. In addition, they are less likely to be overweight.

Girls are Less Likely to Have an Eating Disorder

In a study at the University of Minnesota, Diane Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D. found that weekly family meals helped teens, especially

girls, keep from using unhealthy eating behaviors to control their weight. They were less likely to take laxatives, diet pills or diuretics, avoid eating or make themselves throw up to keep from gaining weight. The high priority and positive atmosphere of family meals in their homes encouraged healthy actions. One study by sciencedaily.com said that, "girls eating 3-4 family meals per week were at about half the risk for extreme weight control behaviors." When the number of family meals increased to 5 per week, the risk dropped to one-third.

Not So Many Risky Behaviors

Dr. Marla Eisenberg out of University of Minnesota claims that "regular family meals protect teens, especially girls from many risky behaviors. They do better in school, have lower rates of depression, thinking about suicide, smoking, drinking, using marijuana, getting into fights, and becoming sexually active."

It's a Good Time to Connect

Sitting down to a meal together gives families time to catch up with each other. Ask your spouse how his or her day was. You're modeling for your children a supportive couple relationship. Mealtime conversation goes hand in hand with parental monitoring. It's important to know what's going on in your children's lives and talking over dinner gives a great chance for parents to tune in to their kids. It's also a great time to teach family history. For example, talking about how the recipe for chocolate cake came from Grandma helps kids understand family connections.

Is Three the Magic Number?

Research says yes. Three to four family meals per week will give your kids a good boost. If you're not there yet...

try this...

1. Have a set time for meals, within reason. Knowing the time for meals creates security.
2. Keep conversation positive. Meals aren't the time for discipline or unpleasant topics.
3. Turn off the TV.
4. Make preparation and clean-up a family event.
5. Expect everyone to be there. This sends the message that every person in the family is important.
6. Encourage kids to try new foods, but don't punish them if they don't like something.
7. Gradually increase the number of family meals that you share. Be creative. Breakfast and lunch count! The most important thing is not what you eat or where you eat. It's that you eat together and talk with each other.

Sources:
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