

# Ask a Specialist: Bring Back Family Mealtime

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09/16/2015



Since everyone has to eat, meals are a great time for family members to converse and connect. Utah Governor Gary Herbert has declared September “Family Meal Month” in an effort to promote healthy family meals in Utah.

Most families think eating meals together is important, but they can be a challenge because of jobs, practice and lesson schedules, school and meetings.

Reports from research summarized in Rutgers University’s “Visions” newsletter reiterate the importance of making it a priority. Author Marilou Rochford states research that gives four key reasons for holding onto family mealtime.

- Conversation around the dinner table helps increase children’s vocabulary, which helps them be better readers. Better readers do better in all subjects.
- Family meals help to strengthen families through dialogue and sharing. This creates a sense of belonging.
- Family meals improve communication. Reviewing appointments, scheduling family time and assigning chores are just a few conversations that improve how a family functions and can help reduce stress during the week.
- Mealtime is a perfect time for children to learn social skills, manners and how to have pleasant conversations. Parents need to set the example and help children practice these skills. This enables children to be better friends and teammates, appreciated students in the classroom and eventually good employees.

Parents may see the value in family mealtime, but may wonder how to overcome the challenges of implementing it. Here are a few suggestions from Rochford:

- Make mealtime a priority. To make mealtime work, it has to be a priority for everyone. If everyone can’t make it for dinner, try eating breakfast together.
- Have a plan. Know everyone’s schedule. Write down a menu. Keep foods on hand that are easy to prepare. Shop ahead and use convenience foods wisely. Don’t sacrifice health or budget for convenience. Also, involve the entire family in getting the meal on the table. Even little ones can set out silverware.
- The menu doesn’t always have to include a home-cooked meal. The meal could be simple like sandwiches from the deli with a fresh tossed salad and milk. Occasional take-out meals are okay, but try limiting them to once a week or less.
- Build a positive feeling at the table and focus on each other. Turn off the TV, phones and radio so there are no distractions. Use this as a time to come together.

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