

# Ask an Expert: Five Reasons to Have Family Mealtime

Kathleen Riggs

09/16/2016



Was it just a generation ago that the majority of American families ate at least one, if not two, meals together every day? In today's fast-paced world, Sunday dinner as a family is a great tradition, but it is a giant step away from daily time spent eating and socializing around the table.

In recognition of its importance, September has been branded as National Family Meals Month. Why all the fuss about sitting down together for a routine that may only last 15-20 minutes? The benefits are actually very numerous.

Utah State University Extension's Food \$ense program lists a few of the benefits – especially for children whose families eat together five or more times a week as opposed to those whose families eat together two times or less each week:

1. Nutrition and physical development – Kids eat more fruits and vegetables, get a wider variety of nutritious foods, have lower rates of childhood obesity and make healthier choices when they eat with their families. Because of this, they are more likely to continue those habits when they are on their own.
2. Emotional development – Kids are better able to manage negative emotions, are at less risk of developing eating disorders and have more positive interactions with others.
3. Social development – Kids learn important turn-taking skills, have improved communication skills and learn appropriate ways to share thoughts, feelings and opinions.

4. Academics – Kids are more likely to earn A's and B's in school. They also develop larger vocabularies – even more so than those who read together with their parents.

5. Behavior – Kids are much less likely to use marijuana, alcohol or tobacco or have friends who use these substances. They are also less likely to engage in other risky behavior such as premarital sex.

If a family is new to the idea of eating meals together, there will undoubtedly be a few challenges. For example, it may be unrealistic to go from zero meals together to eating together every day. So, set a realistic goal all family members can agree on. It may very well be Sunday dinner once a week, and that is a great start. If dinner isn't the best option, perhaps having family breakfast time on Saturday may work better.

Here are some additional tips for making family mealtimes a positive experience:

- \* Plan meals and ingredients ahead of time so you are well prepared.
- \* Schedule a set time for meals.
- \* Involve all family members in the meal preparation and clean up.
- \* Turn off the TV and all other electronic devices, especially phones.
- \* Have pleasant conversation and leave discipline and negative emotions for another time.

Additional helps are available online from Food \$ense, including conversation starter ideas and making meals fun using theme-based ideas, such as Taco Tuesday. The site also includes ideas for menu planning and recipes such as citrus chicken salad, oatmeal nut pancakes and honey glazed chicken.

To learn more about family mealtime or to get ideas for eating healthy on a limited budget, check out the online lessons at [foodsense/eat/together](http://foodsense/eat/together). The Food \$ense homepage also includes a variety of additional resources for menu planning, preparing foods, eating healthier and incorporating physical activity into your day. For information about upcoming classes taught by certified nutrition education assistants in your area, contact your local USU Extension office.

---

By Kathleen Riggs, Utah State University  
Extension family and consumer sciences  
professor, kathleen.riggs@usu.edu

//e.issuu.com/embed.html#2675922/380246897505250

## What Next?

Get useful tips like this as soon as we release them. [Sign up here.](#)