

September Is National Family Meals Month – It's Worth the Effort

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It can be a challenge to juggle responsibilities, schedules, meetings and events so the family can eat together each day. But research shows it is definitely worth the effort.

According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, compared to kids who have fewer than three family dinners per week, children and teens who have frequent family dinners are:

- At 70 percent lower risk for substance abuse.
- Half as likely to try cigarettes.
- Half as likely to try marijuana.
- One third less likely to try alcohol.
- Likelier to get better grades in school.
- Less likely to have friends who drink alcohol and use marijuana.
- More likely to have parents who take responsibility for teen drug use.

From a nutritional standpoint, children who regularly eat meals with their family eat more fruits and vegetables and less saturated fat than children who do not, according to the American Dietetic Association.

Casey Coombs, Utah State University Extension assistant program director for Create Better Health Utah (SNAP-Ed), formerly known as Food \$ense, said making meals in your own kitchen allows you to choose exactly what your family eats.

“Cooking at home allows you to increase the nutritional value of meals by incorporating a variety of healthful foods while also reducing nutrients of concern including sodium, added sugar and saturated and trans fats,” she said. “Improving the nutritional value of your meals can result in long-term health benefits for the entire family.”

David Schramm, USU Extension family life specialist, said eating together can benefit all families, no matter how large or small. Newlywed couples, whose regular complaint is balancing jobs, school and togetherness time, can greatly benefit from enjoying mealtime together. In addition, once the couple gets in the pattern, they will more likely keep it going after having children.

“A wise professor once told me that the purpose of the task is to strengthen the relationship,” Schramm said. “With that in mind, the ultimate purpose of family meals is not just to eat, but to eat together, talk, listen and share. It’s important to turn off screens – phones and TVs – to focus on relationships.”

With that in mind, 90 percent of Americans surveyed in The Harris Poll of 2016 say cell phones don’t belong at the dinner table. Other technology, however, seems to be welcome, with nearly four in 10 eating their family meals in front of the TV.

“With the TV in the background causing distractions, it’s difficult to concentrate on what those at the table are saying and to make any kind of a personal connection,” Schramm said. “And most likely, people aren’t talking or interacting at all because everyone’s engrossed in the TV.”

Schramm said as you look at all the benefits that can come to children and families – nutritionally, socially and emotionally – eating together as a family is definitely worth whatever effort it takes to make it happen, starting with meal prep together, even shopping together, and then cooking together as well as the clean up after.

“These all help foster a sense of connectedness and provide opportunities to talk, which help strengthen the relationships over time,” he said. “When mealtimes are relatively stress-free, children feel more comfortable opening up and talking to parents, which is related to them being willing to open up later about more challenging

topics such as drugs and alcohol. Similarly, eating dinner together as a family can build stronger trust as both children and adults can talk about their days. And when parents listen, children know they can turn to them during more difficult conversations. Eating together also allows parents to notice any changes in patterns of behavior and mood, which may be an early indicator of problems.”

According to LaCee Jiménez, Create Better Health social marketing and eligibility coordinator, the program has implemented the “Create Family Mealtime” campaign to help families with busy schedules and tight budgets learn how to have successful mealtimes. The campaign runs during Family Meal Month in September, but Create Better Health also has resources to help families year-round.

“If eating meals together is a new endeavor, it is important to be realistic and set a goal all family members agree on,” Jiménez said. “If dinner isn’t the best option, perhaps having family breakfast might work better. Be sure to schedule a regular time for whichever meal you choose so family members know the plan. Have family members check electronic devices at the door, and keep the conversation positive, trying to involve everyone.”

To encourage making family mealtime a habit, Create Better Health provides quick tips, meal plans, recipes and ideas to help overcome mealtime challenges. The program also has classes to help participants learn cooking skills and fitness on a budget.

For more information about Create Family Mealtime and the Create Better Health program, visit CreateBetterHealth.usu.edu. For information about upcoming classes taught by certified nutrition education assistants in your area, contact your local USU Extension office.