

Eat family meals together (the fun way)

We've all heard it a million times: kids in families that eat meals together regularly do better across a range of issues. The [Family Dinner Project](#) offers this summary of the scientific research:

Over the past 15 years researchers have confirmed what parents have known for a long time: sharing a family meal is good for the spirit, the brain and the health of all family members. Recent studies link regular family dinners with many behaviors that parents pray for: lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy and depression, as well as higher grade-point averages and self-esteem. Studies also indicate that dinner conversation is a more potent vocabulary-booster than reading, and the stories told around the kitchen table help our children build resilience. The icing on the cake is that regular family meals also lower the rates of obesity and eating disorders in children and adolescents.

Family faith formation guru John Roberto notes that shared family meals have positive benefits for kids' faith lives, too:

So many of the family's faith practices happen around the family meal: having conversations, praying, reading the Bible, celebrating rituals and traditions, to name a few. The family meal is one of the few rituals that allow families to act out their concern for each other, and their need and desire to be together. The family meal is the time when family comes first, establishing, enjoying, and maintaining ties. Just as a meal was central to the ministry of Jesus, the family meal can be a central faith experience for family members, and the family as whole. It is a daily

opportunity to discover Jesus' presence in the midst of family life. ([Best Practices for Family Faith Formation](#))

But if you're like most modern families, you face two big challenges around family dinners:

1. finding time to make shared meals happen, and
2. keeping a lid on mealtime chaos and shenanigans.

While there's no silver bullet, here are some strategies for making time, managing mealtime madness, and actually having some fun, too.

Making time for shared family meals

Finding time to eat dinner together can be tricky, but as the Family Dinner Project points out, you don't need to eat together every single day of the week to reap the benefits of family meals—nor is there anything particularly magic about dinnertime. Breakfast, lunch, or a family “tea time” all work the same magic in building up healthy kids and strong families. Preparing double portions of meals over the weekend or choosing simple-to-prepare meals can also help.

And if busy school and work schedules mean the whole family is never all home at once, plan to eat in small groups: Mom and the little kids eat at 5, Dad and the high school athletes eat later. Then make it a point to eat together as often as you can—on Sundays, for instance.

Ultimately, though, it may come down to making shared family meals a non-negotiable priority: “If you think of family dinner as a time to nourish your family, prevent all kinds of problems, increase your children's cognitive abilities, and provide pleasure and fun that they can build on for the rest of their lives, a nightly meal is an efficient use of time,” says Anne Fishel of the Family Dinner Project.

Bringing order to family meals

Is there any way to bring order to the chaos of meals with multiple kids? A little craziness is probably inevitable, but here are a few basic strategies to try:

1. Begin with prayer...and mix up the way you pray! You might have an old standby, but change it up occasionally so mealtime prayer doesn't become rote.
2. Practice [thirty seconds of silence](#) before your prayer. If nothing else, it works great to transition kids from pre-meal chaos and distractions to a more focused, quiet space.
3. Don't necessarily make dinner your big shared family meal. Everyone is tired and worn out by the end of the day--and that's doubly true of littles, who flame out by late afternoon. Asking everyone to be cheerful and on their best behavior at the end of the day might not be the right way to go, at least not while the kids are small.
4. Eat in separate shifts, then come together for dessert. For example, Mom and Dad might share the salad course together, along with a glass of wine (assuming the kids are old enough to be independent); then mom and dad might eat the main course with the older kids while the littles finish their screen time; then mom and dad might eat with the littles, with everyone coming together for dessert.
5. Put away the screens. That includes televisions (because watching TV short-circuits many of the benefits of eating together) as well as phones. If that's a non-starter for your teens or spouse, ask them to try it one day a week...maybe Sunday.
6. Keep meals short for littles. Toddlers and preschoolers are made to move; sitting still for longer than 10-15 minutes can be a challenge, especially if they're coming

straight off screen time.

7. Don't make manners dominate the meal. Yes, manners are important, but work on one at a time so you can put most of your energy into connecting.
8. Extend the family togetherness to meal prep and cleanup. Many teens and 'tweens actually enjoy cooking; with some guidance from Mom and Dad, they might be able to lead meal prep. Younger kids often view food preparation as an "adult" responsibility and a badge of honor. Cleanup with fun tunes (everyone takes turns being the DJ).
9. Play meal table games, and have structured discussions using one-line discussion starters. The [Family Dinner Project](#) has a database of ideas sorted by age.
10. Go easy on picky eaters. The conventional wisdom among experts is that as long as you're presenting healthy eating choices throughout the day, it's best to take a pass on the picking fights with picky eaters. "Researchers have found that children may need eight to 15 offerings of new foods before they decide they like the food.," says The Family Dinner Project.
11. Pray at the end of the meal, using a short after-meal grace to "bookend" your time together.

5 ways to put some faith and fun into family meals

A lot of meal table discipline problems can be short-circuited by providing kids with structure. Make it something fun, and it's a win-win situation for parents and kids. Here are five ideas to get you started, including a couple with faith connections.

Highs and lows

"Let's share highs and lows from our day!" Highs and lows is as simple as that: each family member gets five minutes to

share the high point and low point of their day. **Bonus:** Make it a sort of mini-examen by asking each person to identify how God was present or at work during their day.

What saint am I?

If you teach your kids the lives of the saints, once in a while play this game at the dinner table. On pieces of masking tape, write the names of some saints your kids all know. Tape a name to each person's forehead. (Or to each person's back, if that works better.) Then invite each person in turn to ask questions of the other people at the table about their saint: "What century did I live in?" "Am I a martyr?" And so on.

Discussion starter cards

The Family Dinner Project has a database of age-appropriate discussion starters, but you can mix it up—and keep it more intentional—by keeping packs of discussion question cards on the table. TableTopics Family ([Amazon](#)) offers a set of 133 discussion question cards specifically designed for families. Any number of card-based games might work at the table: Bible Outburst ([Amazon](#)) is just one example.

Family history

Have kids choose a year in the past 100 years, then tell stories about what family members were doing during that time. Alternatively, kids might want to interview parents about what they were like when the parents were the same ages as the kids.

Telling a shared story

In this game, one person begins telling a story, then each person adds a few sentences: "Once upon a time, a boy named Andy woke up to find a hot air balloon had landed in his yard. It was empty." The next person picks up the story, then passes it on to the next person.

In a variation on this idea, you can have one person being the storyteller...but that person must leave one blank space (a noun, verb, adverb, or adjective) in each sentence to be filled by someone else at the table.

Simple games

Telephone, Twenty Questions, and Would You Rather? are all examples of fun and simple games that all ages can enjoy. For more ideas, visit the [games section](#) of The Family Dinner Project.