

Mealtime Tips - Make it Happen! Whitney Stager, MS, MFT

It's the end of the day. You're exhausted. Your spouse is working late. You have to run one kid to soccer and the other to music. How are you ever going to eat a meal together at this rate? You've read all the research that says it's important for families to eat meals together, but you're pretty sure it's not ever going to happen with your family.

Have you ever felt like this? I have! And I know trying to have a meal together can seem like an impossible feat of planning, organizing, perfect timing - and don't forget cooking!

The good news is having meals together can happen. And they don't (always) have to be stressful! Let's take a look at some ideas to make family meal times happen for you.

Lower your standards, Raise the priority

Not every meal has to be a gourmet feast. And not every meal has to be homemade. The most important thing is to decide to eat a meal together and make it a priority. Pick a day, a time, and a meal. How about trying to have breakfast together as a family? Or, pick one meal a week and schedule everything else around it to protect your family meal-time.

Pre-planning

Invest in one or two helpful kitchen gadgets that you know you will use regularly (food chopper, vegetable steamer, crockpot, etc.). Have an extra ten minutes in the morning or the night before? Pre-cut some vegetables or meat for the next meal. With even more time you can pre-cook the pasta or rice and warm it with the rest of the meal later.

Let the children help

Young children love to help while older children may need a little prompting. When children become a part of making the meal happen, they learn responsibility and feel a sense of belonging. Even the littlest ones can set out napkins or help measure ingredients. Older children can set the table or cut up vegetables. High-schoolers (with some direction and help) can even be responsible for planning and cooking a whole meal. On grocery shopping days, kids can be involved by finding items on the list or picking the ingredients.

Establish good habits

Another priority for mealtime is setting standards so everyone knows what to expect. Pick a couple of main rules: don't talk with your mouth full, say please and thank you, etc. Another important dinnertime rule - respect. Show respect to each person by listening and showing genuine interest in what they have to say. The best way to teach respect and good manners is by your example.

Incorporating prayer is also an important habit for family meal times. Would you like a different child/parent to lead prayer for each mealtime? Would you like to say a set prayer or have spontaneous prayer?

With some prioritizing, pre-planning, and help from family members, mealtimes can happen for you and your family. Happy eating!

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