

# Making Meals a Family Affair

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Most parents look for ways to give their children an edge, but many miss an easy and often inexpensive recipe for success: eating together.

A growing number of studies show that children whose families regularly break bread together reap benefits that go far beyond good nutrition. Some of the strongest evidence comes from Project Eating Among Teens, a long-term study of nearly 5,000 adolescents and their families conducted at the University of Minnesota.

The research shows that family meals "are associated with better dietary intake, including eating more fruit and vegetables, drinking less soda pop and eating less fat -- all the things that we want to promote," says Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and a lead investigator of Project EAT.

Children from families who regularly eat together also seem to have a lower risk of developing eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. They're less likely to be overweight. They perform better in school and are less apt to engage in risky behavior such as taking drugs, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or engaging in sex.

The findings are strong enough that Neumark-Sztainer says she has altered her own routine to make more time for her and her husband to eat more often with their four children. "No family can do everything right, but it's one of the things I have found helpful with my own family," she says.

Eating together is a tradition handed down from generation to generation. But busy schedules, long commutes, homework, evening sports events and other commitments have nibbled away at family meals.

When lawyer and law school professor Cameron Stracher realized that his busy job and two-hour commute meant he ate dinner nightly on the train from Manhattan to his home in Westport, Conn., he embarked on a bold experiment: Sit down with his family five days a week to a real dinner that he helped cook.

As Stracher describes in his new book, "Dinner With Dad" (Random House), he managed over the next 10 months to eat with his family 231 times, averaging 5.5 meals per week and missing his weekly goal only twice.

"Getting home for dinner wasn't easy," he writes, "but it wasn't all that difficult either. I found it just required the commitment and wherewithal to say, 'No thanks' to the late phone call, the garrulous client, the lingering student, my own laziness. . . ."

Research suggests that family meals need not be home-cooked dinners to benefit kids. What seems to count most is time spent eating together without arguments or scolding. Takeout and prepared foods can ease the time crunch. Sharing breakfast or lunch is just as valuable as having dinner together. "It's really important for families to take a good look at what might work for them," Neumark-Sztainer says. "There's not just one way to do it."

What also helps is getting children and teens involved in planning and food preparation as much as possible. "The most successful meals were the ones where my children participated in choosing the menu, prepping the ingredients, cooking the food," Stracher writes. "This is not always an easy thing to do -- it requires patience, compromise, a strong stomach -- but it works. Like life, the messy parts are often the most rewarding, but you have to get dirty first."