

Make Family Meals a Priority In September – and Keep the Habit



American families who eat one meal together every day are among the minority. In today's fast-paced world, eating Sunday dinner as a family is a great tradition, but it is a giant step away from more regular time spent eating and socializing around the table – the norm just one generation ago.

In recognition of its importance, September has been named 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 numerous.

Utah State University Extension's Create Better Health Utah (SNAP-Ed) 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:

* 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 food choices when they are on their own.

* Emotional development – Youth are better able to manage negative emotions, are at less risk of developing eating disorders, and have more positive interactions with others.

* Social development – Children learn important turn-taking skills, have improved communication skills and learn appropriate ways to share thoughts, feelings and opinions.

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

* Behavior – Youth 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 one every day. So, set a realistic goal all family members can agree on – it may just be Sunday dinner once a week, and that is a great start. If dinner isn't the best option, perhaps family breakfast time on Saturday may work better for you.

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

* Plan meals ahead of time.

* Schedule a set time for meals.

* Involve all family members in the meal preparation and clean up.

* Turn off the TV, phones and all other electronic devices.

* Have pleasant conversation and leave discipline and other negative emotions for another time.

Additional helps are available from Create Better Health Utah, including conversation starter ideas and making meals fun using themes (e.g., Taco Tuesday). In addition are ideas for menu planning with recipes, such as citrus chicken salad, oatmeal nut pancakes and honey glazed chicken. You will also find tips on preparing foods, eating healthier and incorporating physical activity in your day.

Learn more about family mealtime and eating healthy on a limited budget here. You can also contact your local USU Extension office to find out about upcoming classes taught by Create Better Health ambassadors in your area.