

Extension

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Sharing the Family Meal

Glenda Wentworth, Family & Consumer Science Extension Agent, Eagle County

Family meals! Can you remember a favorite meal with your family? What were some of the foods you enjoyed sharing with them? Just thinking about it invokes the taste and smell of some of those favorite foods.

Does sitting down as a family around a table really make a difference? It may be challenging to find the time to eat together, but it is important. Sharing a family meal is a perfect time to communicate with each other, promote healthy eating and unwind. Regular family meals can generate feelings of closeness, comfort and stability for children.



Regular family meals create meaningful experiences for children. They are an opportunity to link family members with their culture through food and stories. During this time, children learn about family values, what is important to a family and develop a sense of belonging. It is a powerful tradition that has a huge influence on children.

Researchers have found that children who are involved in family meals may be more likely to:

- Eat more healthy foods
- Be a healthy weight
- Have higher self-esteem
- Have a greater sense of resiliency (the ability to overcome negative experiences)
- Have better grades
- Have better attendance at school
- Have improved mental health
- Have a lower risk of drug and alcohol use
- Have a lower risk of teen pregnancy
- Have a lower risk of depression

When families eat together at least 3 or more times per week, they see many positive benefits for children. A shared meal can be any meal: dinner, breakfast, lunch, or an evening snack that allows your family to gather together regularly.

Keep outside distractions to a minimum during these times. This may mean turning off the television and putting away electronic devices during meals. Relax and enjoy the meal and one another's company.

Family meals can increase the mental, physical and emotional health of children and adults. Sharing a family meal is a simple activity that can yield many healthy results.

Let's Talk:

Fun, creative conversation should be the focal point at family meal time. This is a time for children to share in a nonjudgmental setting, knowing adults will listen to their ideas. This is not a time to criticize or discuss discipline issues. Keeping the conversation fun will allow family members to want to join in during meal times. Using open-ended questions helps children think more creatively and learn to solve problems. It also gives everyone a chance to participate in the conversation. Some examples of open-ended questions are: "If you were given one wish, what would you wish for?" or "If you were an animal, what animal would you be?"

Recipe for Health: Mexican Chicken Soup

Ingredients:

- 2 cans (15 ounces) diced tomatoes (Mexican style)
- 1 can (15 ounces) black beans (drained and rinsed)
(One cup of cooked dried black, kidney or garbanzo beans can be substituted for the canned, if desired)
- 2 cups frozen corn or 1 can (15 ounces) corn (drained and rinsed)
- 1 can (14.5 ounces) low sodium chicken broth OR 2 cups homemade chicken broth
- 2 cloves garlic, minced or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin (optional)
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 pound skinless, boneless chicken breast
- Optional ingredients: baked tortilla chips, chopped cilantro, sliced or chopped avocado, light sour cream, shredded cheese



Instructions:

1. Add tomatoes, beans, corn, broth, garlic, chili powder, cumin (if desired) and pepper in large saucepan.
2. Remove and discard any visible fat from chicken. Cut chicken into large chunks and add to the saucepan. Heat to boiling, reduce heat, and simmer (covered) for 20 minutes, or until chicken is tender.
3. Remove the chicken and place on a plate. Use forks to shred the chicken. Return the shredded chicken to soup.
4. Serve with choice of optional ingredients.