

# Sept. 25 is Family Day—A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children



Good food, great conversations and loads of laughs—that’s what family dinners are made of.

If busy schedules are making it hard for your family to pencil in regular family meals, take a “time out” to consider all the benefits of gathering around the dinner table. Family dinners are about more than just sharing a meal.

The conversations that go hand-in-hand with dinner will help you learn more about your children’s lives and better understand the challenges they face. Created by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, **Family Day—A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children** is a national effort that promotes regular family activities to facilitate parent-child communication, reminding us all of the value of parental engagement, and encouraging parents to make family dinners a regular part of their lives.

Frequent family dinners become more crucial as teens move from middle school to high school. CASA research shows that teens are at greater risk of substance abuse during those years. It’s especially important for parents to stay involved in their children’s lives during this time. Family Dinner is one way to make this happen.

**Make family meals a regular part of your daily routine**

Visit [www.CASAFamilyDay.org](http://www.CASAFamilyDay.org) for more information

## How Can You Celebrate **FAMILY DAY** Every Day?

- ◆ Start the routine of family meals when your children are young
- ◆ Encourage your children to create menu ideas and to participate in meal preparations, including a shopping list
- ◆ Turn off the TV and let the answering machine record calls during mealtime
- ◆ Talk about events of the day: school, work, extracurricular activities, current events
- ◆ Establish a routine to start and end each meal: light candles, say grace, tell a story
- ◆ Keep conversation positive and give everyone a chance to speak
- ◆ Avoid topics that lead to bickering
- ◆ After dinner, play a board game or serve dessert to encourage more conversation

## Mealtimes Prayers

Lord, many people helped bring this meal to us. We thank you for the loving attention and work of those in our home. We thank you also for the many people whom we don’t know who brought us this food: the grocery store employees, the truckers and train engineers, the growers, the harvesters, the canners, the label makers, the scientists always working on improvements, the ranchers, the inspectors... all of them, Lord. Bless them as they sit down to their meals with their families, too. Amen.

Thank you, Lord, for all the gifts you’ve given us today (*pause, allowing each person to name something for which he/she is grateful*). You are so good to us. Bless us, your children. Amen.

Bless this food, dear God, and all who are gathered here. Help us to remember always that you are the unseen guest at every meal. Amen.

Lord, it’s been a busy, noisy day! Here we are together at last to share our meal. Quiet us, soothe our minds, and make us present to the goodness of each other, and mindful of your many gifts all around us. Thank you for this meal. Bless our food and bless us. Amen.

***“A child who does not gather regularly around a table giving thanks to God for food and family will have a very difficult time understanding the meaning of Eucharist.”***

*(An experienced Religious Educator)*



- ... it doesn't need to be every night
- ... it doesn't need to be at home
- ... it doesn't need to be Mom doing it alone
- ... it doesn't need to be dinner
- ... it doesn't even need to be food!

Today's parents recognize that family dinners are more important than ever before. Still, mealtimes can often be difficult. Many children are picky eaters. Others cannot sit still for long. When children or grownups are upset or hungry, it's harder to be kind. Your feelings can be hurt when the food you prepare is not wanted. Even though mealtimes can be stressful, they are important times for families. "Family meals should be seen as sacred rituals," says Pat See, professor of sociology at Chapman University. They are important not only to eat – but to connect, praise, laugh, and problem solve. "In order to have a strong family unit and understand each other's needs, it is essential to be together on a regular basis for meals," she notes.

#### **When children have a part, they often cooperate more readily**

Taking your child along shopping, allowing her/him to select foods from among healthy choices, and giving an age-appropriate task in preparing the meal are all suggestions that can help reduce mealtime stress.

#### **Make rules that are simple and clear**

If children know what to expect, it is easier for them to manage. For example:

- Wash hands before coming to the table
- No eating until everyone is seated
- If you do not like a food, you still have to be polite
- Ask for permission to be excused from the table

#### **Children learn a lot when they listen and talk at mealtime**

At mealtime children learn about taking turns talking and listening. When children know that you care about what they say at mealtime, it becomes an important time to be with you.

#### **Try not to fight about food at mealtime**

Battles over food make mealtime unpleasant for everyone. Small servings can help: children like to feel proud when they can finish everything on their plate. If children are not hungry or are too hungry, mealtime can be harder. Experiment to find the right balance. Some children like to try new foods. Others do not – and forcing only upsets them. You may want to make rules about tasting what is served. In some families, children are encouraged to try a small bite. Some children want to eat the same food over and over, and that can be upsetting to a parent. But when offered healthy choices, doctors say that children typically eat well enough.

Working the family meal into your schedule takes teamwork and prioritizing. Yet when every member has a hand in preparation and clean up and the routine is grounded in the parents' firm commitment, with some planning, creativity, and a pinch of patience, you can serve up closeness and connection that lasts a lifetime.

Portions adapted from [www.familycommunications.org](http://www.familycommunications.org)

## **WHEN FAMILIES EAT TOGETHER**

- ✓ Communication improves
- ✓ Traditions are established
- ✓ Children learn social skills
- ✓ Parents can teach table manners
- ✓ Meals are more nutritious
- ✓ Everyone can be involved (planning, shopping, setting the table, chopping vegetables, doing dishes)
- ✓ Time is spent more efficiently (that creates free time!)
- ✓ Less money is spent on food



*Cook it quick  
and eat it slow*

## **Keep Talking!**

Looking for some prompts to jump-start stimulating table conversation as you reclaim the family meal? Try **Keep Talking—Conversation Starters for the Family Meal** by Maureen Treacy Lahr and Julie Pfitzinger. Its 250 discussion questions will have the entire family thinking, talking, listening and laughing around the table in meaningful dinnertime conversation about values, relationships, safety, and faith.

### *Teens who eat meals regularly with their families*

- Do well in school
- Are emotionally content
- Have positive friendships
- Have healthier eating habits
- Have lower levels of stress
- Are bored less often

[www.CASAFamilyDay.org](http://www.CASAFamilyDay.org)