





The seemingly ordinary act of eating together as a family can have a surprisingly profound effect on nearly all aspects of kids' psychological and social development. Here are some simple ways to make it happen at your house.

The list of benefits for kids who regularly share family meals is pretty astonishing: They are more likely to eat healthfully, maintain an appropriate weight, have larger vocabularies, and get better grades. They're also less likely to engage in risky behavior, including early sexual activity and drug, tobacco, and alcohol use.

"Kids who regularly eat at home with their parents come to see family dinner as this very safe space they can rely on," says Jenny Rosenstrach, a mom of two and blogger behind dinneralovestory.com

If you already have family dinners, great. But if you don't, don't panic. Getting started doesn't mean that you need to have dinner together every single night. Start with whatever you can make work

with your family's schedule—even if that's just once or twice a week. And if dinner just isn't doable, try ritualizing a special breakfast each weekend. More important than the specifics of the meal, obviously, is the family togetherness time. "The idea is to enjoy yourself, not make yourself crazy," says Miriam Weinstein, mother of two and author of *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*.



Good nutrition is an important aspect of family dinner, but the relating, talking, conversation part is crucial. (See *Say What?*, opposite page, for conversation starters.) So don't let technology get in the way. "Kids who are paying attention to a small screen, or a large one, are not getting the social and psychological benefits of a family dinner," says Dr. Thomas Robinson, professor of pediatrics and medicine and director of the Center for Healthy Weight at Stanford Children's Health. And don't think you

need to do all the cooking yourself. In fact, you shouldn't. Once kids are capable of helping out, says Weinstein, participation is the key to making family dinners a valuable and intimacy-building experience. So give everyone a job. Little kids can set the table. Bigger ones can help with chopping, mixing, and dishes. Make it easy for kids to look forward to this time by putting them in charge: Let them help pick the menu and enlist their help in shopping and preparation. "Older kids and teenagers are perfectly

capable of cooking a meal once a week," Weinstein says. "Instead of assuming that teenagers won't participate, assume that they'd like to be given the opportunity to participate." She laughs. "Just don't expect them to thank you." Though once in a while they may surprise you. "My 13-year-old was actually sad that we weren't having family dinner the other night," says Rosenstrach. "It's one of the high points of her day."



say what?

The food is on the table, everyone has assembled, and no one is saying a word. Sound familiar? Whether your kids are in preschool or high school, there are ways of getting them to open up. Just don't start with "How was your day?"

Try any of these tactics to get them talking:

roses & thorns

Each family member has to share one thing from their day that was awesome—those are the roses—and one thing that wasn't so awesome—the thorns. In addition to initiating some real conversation, this has the welcome benefit of clueing you in to some things in your kids' lives—anxieties or accomplishments—that they might otherwise have kept to themselves.

wish of the week

Start a family journal in which each member of the family writes down one wish for the coming week—"I hope I ace my chem test" or "I wish I could play with Sammy every day"—and shares that wish aloud during the meal. It's a great way to learn what's going on in their minds and for them to learn what other family members are thinking about. The best part is that since all the wishes are recorded in a notebook, you end up with a cool keepsake and can go back and browse through past entries—another great way to spark conversation.

card tricks

You can buy boxes of TableTopics® cards—or make your own. Each card is printed with a conversation starter, such as "Which famous athlete would you like to meet?" or "What's your favorite dessert?" A teen version offers more advanced questions, like, "What will be the most exciting thing about getting to leave home?"

the million-dollar question

Asking "What would you do with a million dollars?" is a classic. But there are lots of great variations: What would you do if you didn't have to go to school for an entire year? Whom would you invite to your birthday party if you could invite anyone in the whole world?



getting it just right

You want your children to have healthy appetites. But some appetites are a little too healthy. Meanwhile, others are too finicky. Dr. Thomas Robinson, professor of pediatrics and medicine and director of the Center for Healthy Weight at Stanford Children's Health, has helped many thousands of children and families achieve and maintain healthy weights. He offers these tips for keeping all kinds of eaters on track.

for big eaters

TEMPER TEMPTATION

To make it easier on everyone, only buy or make the kinds of foods you want your kids to eat (e.g., keep the cookies out of the cupboard). And serve from the kitchen, not family style: "If you have to get up from the table to get more, you'll eat less than if the food is right there in front of you," Robinson says. Salads and veggies can be an exception to this rule if you want your kids to fill up on healthy foods first.

STAY IN THE ZONE

To cut down on snacking, make the dining room or kitchen the place people eat. Period.

DOWNSIZE DISHWARE

Downsize your plates, bowls, glasses, mugs, serving dishes, and utensils to help with portion control. Children and adults serve, eat, and drink more when using larger dishware. In research studies, when they eat off smaller dishware, kids don't feel more hungry, take more helpings, or compensate for eating less at one meal by eating more at the next.

STAY OFF SCREENS

Avoid eating with television, computers, tablets, or phones. Besides the obvious impact on family discussions, being distracted while eating makes you eat more by making you less tuned in to the tastes and feels of the foods, and less aware of how much you're eating.

DO DISHES

Get everyone in the family in the habit of eating everything—even snacks—off of plates or in bowls. "When you eat out of a bag or box, it's much harder to appreciate how much you're consuming," Robinson says.



for picky eaters

DON'T PLAY SHORT ORDER COOK

Just because your kid turns up her nose at what you're serving doesn't mean you have to make her a different dish. It's okay for her to wait until the next meal. You can also make sure there's at least one (healthy) option on her plate that you know she likes (unsweetened applesauce or carrots and hummus are good options) so she won't go hungry.

DON'T FORCE IT

Insisting kids eat something can often backfire, making them less likely to like it. It is, however, okay to have a one-or-two-bite rule. And don't give up on certain foods. It's normal for children to be wary of new foods. Studies have found that it can take 10 or more exposures to a new taste before a child starts to like it, and that liking increases with every new exposure.

FIND WAYS TO BE FLEXIBLE

Choose recipes that are easy to customize—homemade pizzas with choose-your-own toppings, tacos served bar-style with all the fixings, deconstructed salads where each person can pick what goes on his plate. That way, you're only making one meal but everybody gets something they like.

BAN BRIBERY

Bribes may work in the short term but backfire in the long term, by making the reward more desirable and making the food you want them to eat even less desirable than when you started. This especially applies to dessert: Using sweets or dessert as a reward for eating healthy vegetables will just make kids like healthy foods even less.

PUT A STICK IN IT

Sometimes a little novelty does the trick. Some kids who won't touch a chicken breast can't get enough of a chicken skewer, for example. Have fun with the food, and your pickiest eater might give it a try.

SET THE EXAMPLE

Eat and enjoy the foods you want your children to eat. Parents are powerful role models and if they make a face or offhand remark that shows they don't like a food, their child will see that as permission to follow along. If parents act genuinely positively about the benefits and enjoyment of eating healthy foods, their children are more likely to eat them as well.

DON'T RELY ON DISTRACTIONS

Distracting picky eaters with television, movies, or phones can sometimes get them to eat food mindlessly, which is why parents use this strategy. But it backfires in the long term by interrupting the process of becoming familiar and mindful of the enjoyment, taste, and feel of foods they eat. Eliminating screens from the dinner table will help you raise a healthy eater with a healthy relationship with food and eating.

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Is your child struggling to maintain a healthy weight? Learn more about the Stanford Children's Health Center for Healthy Weight at weightcontrol.stanfordchildrens.org