

Family Meals Are Important for Kids' Development

Parents are serving up a lot more than nutritious food when they insist that their families eat meals together. The more meals that families eat together, the more positive results that are seen in the individual and family unit.

Even toddlers benefit from being with family during meal time. K-State Research & Extension specialist Sandy Proctor says this is where a lot of useful conversation happens, and young children who aren't able to speak yet are really picking up on language development and formation. It's shown to be a benefit to them as they're getting a start at processing words and interacting with conversation.

As youth grow into the teen years, family meals provide grounding and a "connectedness" to the family's values. We know from research that young pre-teens and teens are less likely to have anti-social and or delinquent tendencies if they have more family meals says Proctor. There are some grounding benefits to meals that reach well beyond just the fact that it's nice for parents to know where everybody is at for a short period of time.

Proctor sites studies indicating that only 40% of teens say they eat meals with family three to six times per week. One-third of those surveyed reported eating with their family two or fewer times the previous week, and 14% said they had no family meals.

Eating together more than five times a week has been found to be linked to better mood and better mental health for kids in the school years, meaning ages 6-10 and teens. Sometimes our schedules get so crazy and it's hard to make it happen. People need to be a little forgiving of themselves and know that it won't happen every meal, but when you can make it happen, it's well worth the effort.

Don't limit family meals to dinner. If family meals happen at breakfast, that's great. The family's schedule may only allow for morning meals on some days, and evening meals on others. Be flexible.

Share in the work. Older children may be able to do some of the cooking, while setting the tables is more appropriate for others. Encourage time when everyone is focused on the task. Some of those conversations are more true and meaningful than they might be otherwise.

Put down the phone. Electronics are a distraction to productive family conversations.

The research around family meals suggests that if your family is one of those that doesn't have spontaneous conversation, then maybe you could try conversation starters, such as, 'What are two things that you learned today that surprised you.' Every family is unique and it may take practice to get those conversations to flow.