

Family Meal Time

JENNIFER TERRELL, 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AGENT

As parents, educators, researchers, social service organizations, and government programs search for answers about the well-being of the American family, it is apparent that family meals tell us a lot about how those families become and stay connected.

Family meals provide a great amount of good, in a variety of ways, for the entire family. Young children show improved literary skills, children and adolescents gain improved food habits, and older adults not only eat better, but increase socialization. Intergenerational family meals help preserve and pass along family culture, traditions, and values.

Despite all the directions families are pulled today, parents are still the biggest influence on the food and meal habits of their children. It is important to realize that meals don't need to be home-cooked masterpieces in order to serve the purpose. Focus on familiar foods that fit the time, skills, and favor of your family. The meals don't necessarily have to take place at home around the dinner table either. Based on the scheduling barriers, dinner could be a picnic at the park between practices or meetings. If dinners are impossible due to busy schedules, give family breakfasts a try.

If family meals are not common for your family, it might seem difficult to know how to get started. So, sit down as a family and have a discussion. Allowing family members to contribute to this new venture will make them feel even more connected and responsibility in seeing it through. It is important to be realistic and consistent with expectations. As well as being flexible. Dr. Sandy Procter, Specialist in Maternal and Child Nutrition for Kansas State University shares some tips to help:

- Turn off the television. Remember, it is not a member of the family. Let phone calls wait until later. Make sharing the meal the priority.
- Share the effort of meal planning and putting a meal on the table. You will find the benefits are also shared!
- Avoid making too many rules for mealtime. Instead, try to model the actions and behavior you would like children to exhibit.
- Use "conversation starters," if needed, to keep a discussion going. Other families may need to practice taking turns to let everyone have a chance to speak uninterrupted.
- Keep the meal pleasant. Try to make mealtimes together a positive time.

There is no single environment when it comes to family meals – and those numerous environments mean every family, every schedule, every mealtime is unique. But even though there may be barriers, it is possible to work through them and make successful family meals happen for you and your family.

For information, contact Jennifer Terrell, District 4-H Youth Development Extension Agent for K-State Research and Extension – Southwind District at 620-223-3720 or jkterrell@ksu.edu.