Getting the Most Out of Your Family Dinners

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What’s so great about family dinners?

• Good for the Brain
• Good for the Body
• Good for the Spirit (or mental health)
Brain Food

- Harvard literacy study links dinner conversation with boost to vocabulary
- Higher achievement scores
- Higher grades
Does a body good

- Consume more fruits, vegetables, protein, fiber, and vitamins
- Consume fewer fried foods, fatty foods, and soft drinks
- Greater likelihood of eating breakfast
- Teenagers grow up to be adults who eat more fruits and vegetables, and less likely to be obese
- Lower rates of eating disorders and obesity
Soul Food

- Lower rates of violence, drug and tobacco use, school problems, early sexual behavior in teens
- Less anxiety and depression
- Increased resilience, self esteem
- Kids feel more connected parents
- More protected from aftermath of cyberbullying
- Lowered stress in kids and adults

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As part of a school-wide commitment to family dinners, The Family Dinner Project team has hosted a series of Community Dinners with families from the Ford School, an elementary school in Lynn, MA.
Obstacles to family dinner

- Busy schedules (both kids and adults)
- “Picky” eaters (both kids and adults)
- Tension at the table
- Cost of food
- Exhaustion/Lack of time
Picky eaters

- Peaks at ages 4-8, so get toddlers to try foods
- Model your enjoyment
- Rule of 15: Familiarity breeds acceptance
- Don’t reward kids with dessert
- Pair a tried-and-true with a novel side
- Relaxed atmosphere helps
- Describe taste with 5 words
- Customizing dishes
If you don’t like to cook

- Food is just the on-ramp, so focus on conversation and games
- Cut corners
- Serve breakfast or lunch at dinner
- Teach your kids and/or share the load
- Make double batches
- Cook “quick food”
Reducing tension at the table

• Prepare a list of meals that everyone will agree on
• Go easy on teaching manners
• Keep topics off the table that usually result in fights
• Parents and kids adhere to technology rules
• Laughter and feeling listened to are best antidotes
• Let go of perfection
More benefits from family dinners

• Opportunities to Play with your Food
• The special richness of Story-telling
• Chance to Experiment with New Behaviors and Roles
• Natural bridge from dinner to the Wider World of other Cultures and Activism

Anne K. Fishel, PhD, Massachusetts General Hospital, 2015
Play with your Food

Awakens the senses: Play with Shape, Smell, Taste

If you play, you’ll eat what you make: Salad Collage

Artistic expression: “Cooking is an art but you can eat it too.” Marcella Hazan

Engages the scientist: pickling

Play can extend time at the table: Play games
Power of Story-Telling

- The way we make sense of the world
- Kids who know family stories are more resilient and have higher self esteem
- Certain types of stories (lemonade from lemons) are extra potent
- Helps kids feel connected to something bigger than themselves.

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Duke’s “Do you know? Scale: 20 Questions

• Do you know the source of your name?

• Do you know some of the jobs your parents had when they were young?

• Do you know which person in the family you most act like?

• Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences?

• Do you know where your mother/father grew up?

• Do you know where your parents met?

Stories you can tell

- When you were the same age as your child
- About an animal
- A love story
- A work or job story
- A story about moving to a new city or country
- Overcoming a challenge
- A story about a recipe
- A funny story
- A story about a holiday or celebration
- A story about your name or about your child’s name
Dinner is a laboratory: Experiment!

- Dinner is annex to my office
- Try new behavior
- Try new roles
- Try new life stage
Connect to the Wider World

• Food is the ultimate connector— to the environment and to fellow human beings
• Dinner as a passport to cultural experiences
• Food Justice: we waste $2000/year on food thrown out
• Prevent food waste
• Teach composting
• Eat lower on the food chain
• Cultivate a gardening activist
What makes Family dinner so protective and effective?

• One of the few times of the day to connect
• The power of ritual
• Place to tell stories
• Talking makes us eat less mindlessly
Connection

- Kids who feel connected to their parents feel better
- Catch problems when they are small
- Parents know what’s going on
- Teens rate dinner high on list of preferred activities
- Everyone gets a chance to speak and listen
- Connection provides a powerful seat belt
Power of Ritual

- Makes boundary around family
- Time away from daily hubbub
- Allows stability
- Scripted and unscripted
- Connects us to previous generations
- Offers meaning