

Family Meals Really Do Make A Difference

Family meal time is when everyone at home sits down and enjoys a meal together. This can be at breakfast, lunch and/or dinner. It has been shown that families who eat together are healthier and happier. Research conducted by Hammons & Fiese indicates the following about family meals. Your child may be 35 percent less likely to engage in disordered eating, 24 percent more likely to eat healthier foods and 12 percent less likely to be overweight.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension encourages families to cook together, eat together, talk together and make mealtime a family time. Here are the benefits of family mealtime:

- **Builds relationships.** Eating together helps to build a close relationship with your family. It gives everyone in the family a chance to learn more about each other. Turn off the television and phones or don't answer them when someone calls during mealtime. Instead use the time to talk, connect and make memories together. It is a lesson your children will use for life.
- **Eat better.** Meals prepared at home are usually more nutritious than meals eaten while dining out.
- **Portion sizes.** Children learn about correction portion sizes, food groups and nutrition when eating with their family. Let the children serve themselves at dinner. Teach them to take small amounts at first. Tell them they can get more if they are still hungry. Also be a role model for the children, by portioning out the right amount for your self.
- **Stability.** Eating with your children gives them as sense of security. Studies show that this decreases the chances that the child will engage in activities such as smoking and drinking.
- **Saves Money.** Eating at home saves the family money. Most often it is cheaper to cook meals at home than it is to eat out.
- **Cooking Skills.** Get everyone involved in meal preparation. Most kids love to help cook. Letting them help prepare food will help them feel valued and part of the family.
- **Social Skills.** Eating together as a family gives the children an opportunity to learn and practice their social skills, table manners and communication skills.
- **New Foods.** Offer your children new foods, but don't force them to eat it. Let them choose how much to eat. Kids are more likely to enjoy a food when eating it is their own choice. It also helps them learn to be independent.

Some things that you can do to have enjoyable meals include:

- Make mealtime timely. Children need to have time to sit down and eat. It doesn't have to be long. Sitting down for too long can lead to irritability and decrease mealtime enjoyment.
- Meals don't have to be fancy. They don't have to have a lot of preparation and time. They can be simple recipes such as grilled cheese sandwiches, soup and apple slices.
- Plan ahead to save time. Plan a menu in advance. Cook double the amount of meat you need one night so that you can use the extra precooked for the next evening meal

- Be a good example. Your children will more likely eat healthy and eat a variety of foods if they see you doing it. Try to include foods from each of the five food groups at family meals. It is also okay to have a dessert as well.