



Dinner Together Is a Protective Shield



Character stories aside, even if the only thing you learn from my website is the importance of gathering together for dinner daily, I will be satisfied. This one habit will start your family on the path to a better way of connecting, satisfying meals together. Currently *only 30 percent* of families are eating dinner together on a regular basis.¹ So few are accessing the power of family dinner! Focusing on each other, cooking healthy food, and working to make it a loving, meaningful experience can have a cascading effect of many mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual gains for us and our families.

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES DOCUMENT THE GAINS OF FAMILY DINNERS

Recently at Sunday dinner, one of my adult daughters, Abby, was telling us how one of her best friends, Genny, had become obsessed with the importance of family dinner. Genny started polling her friends on Instagram to see who had dinner together and who didn't. What

Genny noticed in her small poll of 20 or so people is that those who ate dinner together had stronger family relationships and less drama in those relationships. Abby finished, “I never knew how important having dinner together was.” When you are the recipient of such a gift, you don’t always understand how something so simple, something that was always part of your childhood, could be so powerful.

Dr. Anne Fishel is a family therapist, a clinical psychologist, associate clinical professor of psychology at the Harvard Medical School, and the director of The Family Dinner Project. She jokes in a podcast that her job as a family therapist would go away if more families ate regularly together. She said:

There have been more than 20 years of dozens of studies that document that family dinners are great for the body, the physical health, the brains and academic performance, and the spirit or the mental health, and in terms nutrition, cardiovascular health is better in teens, there’s lower fat and sugar and salt in home cooked meals even if you don’t try that hard, there’s more fruit, and fiber, and vegetables, and protein in home cooked meals, and lower calories. Kids who grow up having family dinners, when they’re on their own tend to eat more healthily and to have lower rates of obesity.

Then the mental health benefits are just incredible. Regular family dinners are associated with lower rates of depression, and anxiety, and substance abuse, and eating disorders, and tobacco use, and early teenage pregnancy, and higher rates of resilience and higher self esteem.²

Dr. Fishel is an expert citing dozens of studies on the benefits of family dinners over twenty years of research. She says that eating meals together has shown to lower obesity rates and lessen the likelihood of teenagers experimenting with drugs and alcohol and early sexual activity. As if this evidence of the protective shield eating dinner together provides wasn’t enough, her promise of “higher rates of resilience and higher self-esteem” as another incredible by-product of meals together is so critical to know. We as parents can be overwhelmed by parenting. I felt overwhelmed a lot. Being clued in on

what really, really works *the best* can be life changing and help us focus our efforts on the habits and practices, like dinner together, that provide the biggest big pay-offs.

THERE IS A RECIPE TO MAKE DINNERS SUCCESSFUL

To make the most of our family mealtimes follow these guidelines:

1. Turn off television and mobile devices while preparing dinner, during dinner, and after dinner during clean-up.
2. Have family meals together at least five times a week. There are 16 meals families can have together—5 weekday breakfasts, 5 weekday dinners, and 6 meals on the weekends. The research says benefits start with at least five meals together per week.³
3. Listen, listen, listen, and respond in a positive, loving manner during the meal.
4. Have candles to extend the time together and create a magical atmosphere.
5. Include our children in every aspect—picking meals, posting a list of meals for the week, making dinner, setting the table, and cleaning up afterwards. These are life skills that once learned will bless them for the rest of their lives. This feels like too much effort initially, but you will soon see the pay-offs.
6. Spend enough time connecting to make the work that dinner takes worthwhile. After our meals we would do a “5-Minute Clean-up” with the whole family, and then one child was left to finish up. Most of the work was done for the child on duty in those first five minutes.

Back when I had six children in my home, my goal was: Sunday through Thursday nights for dinner, and Monday through Friday we would sit down and have breakfast together before school. The weekends were busier and more of a free-for-all meal-wise except for Sunday dinner. I also gathered whoever was home at the time to eat together. Even if there are only two of you, the benefits of eating together are still so much higher than eating alone. See the article on this website titled, “Finishing Strong with Your Last Child.”

LEARNING TO SEE THE VALUE OF DINNER TOGETHER

In my 20's we were poor students and in my 30's we were paying off student loans. Saving money was my first big motivator that got me making meals at home. As our family got bigger, I figured ingredients that cost \$5.00–\$10.00 that I transformed into a meal saved us \$30.00. I didn't understand at that time that the emotional and spiritual feast that was happening from eating our homemade meals together far outweighed the financial benefits.

It was in my 40's when the pin dropped for me and I finally understood the emotional and spiritual benefits for all of us when we ate together. I realized that eating together gave me “an enjoyment boost” that I could feel every day—a reward for all of the hard work that parenting is. I liked saying family prayer when we were already gathered to eat. Our children were helping cook, and feeling happy to help. I liked ending most days together in a circle of candlelight. This “aha!” moment gave me momentum to keep cooking and gathering our children, because I didn't love cooking and it took a great effort to train toddlers and teenagers to help cook and clean up.

This is the time when we discovered the magic of candles at dinner. Candles at dinner changed our meals by making them longer and reminding us that our time together was precious and special. Please look for the tab on this site that gives more of an explanation, titled *Candles at Dinner*.

In my 50's, I started realizing how much healthier eating at home was, and that too encouraged me to keep cooking meals, every year, forcing myself because of all the benefits.

THERE ARE MANY OBSTACLES TO KEEP US FROM EATING TOGETHER

We are busy. It takes effort to plan, shop, cook, and then gather our family from all of their busy lives. Despite these obstacles, I was determined to make dinner work. The more we ate together, the more benefits I felt. These benefits in turn made us more capable of shouldering through the obstacles, helping us create a habit that became lighter

with time. As you begin to feel momentum, my hope is that it will become easier for you too; to plan, shop, prepare, and clean up, involving your children as much as you can in each step.

As with every new skill we learn, it becomes easier as we keep practicing. Practicing helped my children learn to cook the whole meal on their own. This was such a victory for us, and I truly felt like a jackpot winner when a steaming pot was carefully brought to our table without my assistance. The work, responsibility, and attention was thrilling to them. The reward of their efforts to bless our whole family showed up on the chef-of-the-night's face. Here is a blogger who captures the work and obstacles that keep us from making dinner happen. She is as determined as I was, and she made it happen despite the obstacles:

Several months ago, I was talking to a group of soccer moms and dads on the sidelines before the match began. The talk turned to dinnertime and every single person in the group was slack-jawed when I said (in answer to a direct question) that I cook dinner every night. This was a group of doctors, lawyers, corporate executives, and accountants. They told me how hard they found the whole concept of putting a meal on the table. The refrigerator was empty. The kids were coming and going. No one really knew how to cook.

I admit to stammering a bit as I shared about menu planning, grocery lists, and regular dinner times. It's not brain surgery or international law. Making family dinners happen does require sound management with a generous dash of creativity. And it benefits greatly from the resolve that comes from recognizing the value. We make sure our children take showers and brush their teeth. All those parents make sure their children get to soccer practice. I choose to make sure that my family eats dinner together every night. I think it's important. It's worth the effort.⁴

Isn't it interesting the reaction she got from educated and highly skilled parents at the soccer game—their astonishment that her family eats dinner together every night? Making this a priority is really

countercultural. We can fill our days with important activities but not *crucial* ones. We can eat fast food on the run from piano lessons to baseball practice but not be truly filled. A nurturing dinner together is one of those crucial activities that will help our children to flourish on the inside.

Dr. Fishel says, “Kids who eat regular family dinners in elementary school and in high school get better grades, and the effect is stronger than even doing homework, or doing art, or sports.”⁵ Having a rich, meaningful dinner before we think about including extracurricular activities into our schedule will help our families much, much more than those extra activities will.

Do you see how the above blogger makes it happen? She gives hints of her systematic approach on how to be successful. She said she had a specific time every night when dinner was served. She also said meal planning and grocery lists make dinners happen. This is intentional work that many families are letting fall by the wayside because it takes planning and follow-through. Experts say meal planning with a posted menu is one of the best ways to ensure success. Also sitting down together for as many meals as possible from when our children are babies in highchairs, creates a family pattern *to sit down together* that becomes deeply ingrained.

The French, as a culture, prioritize sitting down together as the only way to enjoy a meal.

Every day a small miracle occurs without anyone paying the slightest attention. At breakfast, lunch and supper tens of millions of French people decide to gather round a table at the same time in order to share a meal, as if some invisible conductor raised his baton to mark the start of festivities.⁶

This is an amazing “miracle.” As a culture the French only eat the highest quality food they can afford and prepare it at home to eat with their families. We lived in the French part of Belgium in the late 1990s and I got to witness with my own eyes the priority and reverence the French have for their food. Please look for the tab, “Picky Eaters” on the website for more information about the French way of eating.

Things don't always work out. Emergencies or unexpected challenges come up and can upend a day or week. I always had breakfast for dinner when my planned meal didn't work out—eggs and toast, or a whole-wheat pancake mix would do the trick, so we could still sit and eat together. It was fast food at home, but my healthier version.

IS IT GRATIFYING TO BE TOGETHER?

My husband's business colleague came from a toxic family and he told us he actually overturned a table at dinner once when he was a teenager. Criticism and contempt can change this magical time to one to be avoided at all costs. We as the parents set the tone and even if we are tired or discouraged, we need to see having dinner together as "worth it."

- What is the secret ingredient for an enjoyable, gratifying dinner together? Consider these questions:
- Is it gratifying and satisfying to be together? Why, or why not?
- When our children speak, is someone listening?
- Are we treating each other, even the neediest toddler or moodiest teenager, as individuals, with thoughts, troubles, quirks, and personalities?
- Are we bringing our personal problems or adult stresses to the table with us? Can we keep our own stressors at bay and set them aside during this time together? Or, can we ask for help with our struggles or stresses, being open and honest with each other? Children can think that when we are stressed, it's their fault. Imagine sharing what is stressing us and having our families see us be vulnerable, that we struggle, and that talking it over with people we love can help us work through hard things in our lives. What benefits do you see coming from such conversations?

Dining well at the end of the day is more than delicious food. It's being with our families in a relaxed state. Family dinner is a chance to connect, listen, gripe, teach, applaud, and savor. Our meals are a place

to tell stories, to check in on our childrens' day, to encourage and to moan over unfortunate experiences. Our children are a captive audience at this time. Their hunger has brought them to our tables. We must use this time well!

Many families use this time for family prayer, kneeling by their chairs to set this prayer apart as special, and scripture study. There are so many ideas now, like spending five minutes having a spiritual thought, or asking one child to read a favorite scripture and share why he likes it. This is the time to have the gospel go deep into our children's hearts—each day when we are eating together, telling scripture stories and personal experiences. I am calling you from less essential activities, to this one. Let's show our children that they are important enough to make the effort.

As an old, seasoned mother I feel a mission to help families learn what it took me years to figure out. I am imploring you to wake up and focus on this family time together instead of having your career, church jobs, volunteering activities, or recreational hobbies, as your number one priority. Let us drink deeply from this time together to fill our dry, withered, emotional and spiritual cracks to their fullest. The days are long with our children but the years are short. Let us use those long days well.

Dinner together is a tremendous leveraging activity. Leveraging means a little effort from us for a cascading stream of benefits. This time together is the real, daily reward for all of our efforts getting our schooling, our degrees, our training, all of our efforts to buy and furnish a home, to clothe, shop for food, and get our children to and from their activities. This oasis where time has slowed down and we are feeding each other in many ways by sharing our time and essence together, is priceless.

Incorporating our children's daily physical needs of nourishment into strong family ties and rituals will take our very best efforts. Sometimes we focus on exterior gains to improve our children's lives like earning more money, having nicer things, a multitude of lessons, or fun vacations. A decision to spend more of our precious time preparing and eating together at our table at home—not fast food, not on the run, not everyone at different times—is a wise, protective choice.

When we take time to enlighten our children about character traits and how to build them, we are educating and inoculating them from the inside. Prayer and scripture study will cement us together in a spiritual, meaningful way. When we eat meals with them as often as we can, feeding them physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, this will be one of the most powerful things we can do to protect and prepare our children on the inside to go out into the world. As we look around at the bright faces at our candlelit table, we will know that it is worth every bit of effort.

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1. Jill Anderson, "Harvard EdCast: The Benefit of Family Mealtime," *Harvard: Graduate School of Education*, 1 Apr. 2020, www.gse.harvard.edu/news/20/04/harvard-edcast-benefit-family-mealtime.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Anne Fishel, "FAQ," *The Family Dinner Project*, accessed Oct. 2022, thefamilydinnerproject.org/resources/faq/.
 4. Elizabeth Foss, "Candlelight at the Table," 26 Jan. 2011, *In The Heart of My Home: Journal*, www.elizabethfoss.com/journal/realllearning/2011/01/candlelight-at-the-table.html.
 5. Jill Anderson, "Harvard EdCast: The Benefit of Family Mealtime," *Harvard: Graduate School of Education*, 1 Apr. 2020, www.gse.harvard.edu/news/20/04/harvard-edcast-benefit-family-mealtime.
 6. Anne Chemin, "France remains faithful to food as meals continue to be a collective affair," *The Guardian*, 4 Apr. 2014, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/apr/07/france-food-ritual-meal-tradition.