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Making Meals a Family Affair

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By Sally Squires

Tuesday, May 29, 2007; HE01

Most parents look for ways to give their children an edge, but many miss an easy and often inexpensive recipe for success: eating together.

A growing number of studies show that children whose families regularly break bread together reap benefits that go far beyond good nutrition. Some of the strongest evidence comes from Project Eating Among Teens, a long-term study of nearly 5,000 adolescents and their families conducted at the University of Minnesota.

The research shows that family meals "are associated with better dietary intake, including eating more fruit and vegetables, drinking less soda pop and eating less fat -- all the things that we want to promote," says Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and a lead investigator of Project EAT.

Children from families who regularly eat together also seem to have a lower risk of developing eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. They're less likely to be overweight. They perform better in school and are less apt to engage in risky behavior such as taking drugs, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or engaging in sex.

The findings are strong enough that Neumark-Sztainer says she has altered her own routine to make more time for her and her husband to eat more often with their four children. "No family can do everything right, but it's one of the things I have found helpful with my own family," she says.

Welcome to the fourth and final week of the [Lean Plate Club Fit for Fun Family Challenge](http://www.leanplateclub.com). If you're just discovering the challenge, it's never too late to join. The goals and tools for the challenge are posted at <http://www.leanplateclub.com> for use any time and will remain available.

The Family Challenge is simply designed to help you and your family prepare for summer fun. These four weeks of goals are also designed to be used throughout the year to help tweak your eating and exercise habits.

This week's activity goal is to get 15 minutes of exercise with your family twice. It could be playing catch, riding a bike, gardening or mowing the lawn, walking the dog together, tossing a Frisbee or just strolling through a museum or the zoo. If you're like most Americans, you and your family fall short of the recommended physical activity. That's a minimum of 30 minutes daily for adults, 60 minutes for children and teens.

Being more active now helps set the stage for being more active this summer, whether you plan to swim at the neighborhood pool, play tennis or head to the beach or elsewhere during your vacation.

The food goal is to prepare and eat a healthy meal with your family. To assist in that effort, tomorrow's Food section will provide five recipes for family dinners that anyone can make. Among the choices: Greek feta chicken, pancetta pasta and whole-wheat quesadillas with cheddar and refried beans. Is your mouth watering yet?

Eating together is a tradition handed down from generation to generation. But busy schedules, long commutes, homework, evening sports events and other commitments have nibbled away at family meals.

When lawyer and law school professor Cameron Stracher realized that his busy job and two-hour commute meant he ate dinner nightly on the train from Manhattan to his home in Westport, Conn., he embarked on a bold experiment: Sit down with his family five days a week to a real dinner that he helped cook.

As Stracher describes in his new book, "Dinner With Dad" (Random House), he managed over the next 10 months to eat with his family 231 times, averaging 5.5 meals per week and missing his weekly goal only twice.

"Getting home for dinner wasn't easy," he writes, "but it wasn't all that difficult either. I found it just required the commitment and wherewithal to say, 'No thanks' to the late phone call, the garrulous client, the lingering student, my own laziness. . . ."

Research suggests that family meals need not be home-cooked dinners to benefit kids. What seems to count most is time spent eating together without arguments or scolding. Takeout and prepared foods can ease the time crunch. Sharing breakfast or lunch is just as valuable as having dinner together. "It's really important for families to take a good look at what might work for them," Neumark-Sztainer says. "There's not just one way to do it."

What also helps is getting children and teens involved in planning and food preparation as much as possible. "The most successful meals were the ones where my children participated in choosing the menu, prepping the ingredients, cooking the food," Stracher writes. "This is not always an easy thing to do -- it requires patience, compromise, a strong stomach -- but it works. Like life, the messy parts are often the most rewarding, but you have to get dirty first."

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