

Family Meals Nourish Body and Soul

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and youth may all hold jobs. There's sports practice, dance lessons, music lessons, homework, a house to clean, clothes to wash, perhaps an older parent or relative to care for, and...

One way to maintain communication in a busy family is through family meals. University of Nebraska Family Life Specialist, John DeFrain, researches characteristics of strong families and has found one attribute of emotionally healthy families is they spend time together. This includes eating meals with one another on a routine basis.

The theme for the annual University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension sponsored "NU for Families" month in November is "Eat with Your Family." All Nebraska families are encouraged to eat meals together as part of building a strong family.

Just sitting together at the table doesn't always lead to fascinating family conversations or warm mealtime memories, however. Here are some ideas for building family traditions, improving nutrition, and enhancing communication:

- ***It's Not "What" but "How" You Feed Your Family.*** Simple foods served with love and laughter will outshine gourmet goodies almost any time.

- ***It Doesn't Have to be Hot to be Healthy!*** Tuna sandwiches, a salad and some frozen yogurt can be just as healthy for your family as something you slaved over at the stove.

- ***Start Slow, Learn as You Go.*** Don't try to go from no meals to nightly meals. Start with one meal together weekly. Find what works for your family and go from there.

- ***Take Turns Talking with a "Talking Stick."*** If everyone in your family talks at once, take a tip from the Winnetka Alliance for Early Childhood. They suggest borrowing the "talking stick" idea from Native Americans. They only allow the person holding the stick to talk. You might have a "talking cup" or other special item that gets passed around.

- ***Don't Answer the Phone During Mealtime.*** How often are your meals

If you're like most families, you're caught in a time crunch. Adults

interrupted by the phone? If you can't stand to ignore a ringing phone, either unplug it or turn off the ringer. Use your answering machine or voice mail if it's hard to refrain from responding to a call. If there are some calls you need to answer immediately, such as those from an ill parent, get caller I.D.

- ***Turn Off the TV.*** Encourage family members to star in their own lives and relate to each other rather than to some image on the TV screen. If there is an "absolutely must see" show that occurs during dinnertime, tape it for later viewing.



- ***Get Children Involved in Making Meals.*** Children, especially younger children, tend to tune in more to meals they help prepare. If everyone's hungry and in a hurry when they get home at night, try cooking together with children over

the weekend. Or, prepare something for the next day AFTER you've finished eating.

- ***Cook it Quick but Eat it Slow.*** Check out the many cookbooks and Internet resources that give tips for putting together healthy meals in a hurry. Though you may hurry meal preparation time, allow ample time to enjoy the meal with your family. For starters, check the Lancaster Extension "Cook it Quick" Web site at: <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/ianr/lanco/family/ciq.htm>

- ***Table Talk Tips.*** Share positive things that have happened during the day. One family had a mealtime ritual where everyone told one new thing they learned that day—including mom and dad! Some families have a night where there's an assigned table topic. Here are some popular ideas:
 - Describe something that happened recently that made you feel really happy.
 - Someone gave you \$1,000. You have to spend some of it on your family before you can buy anything for yourself. What would you buy for everyone?
 - If you could live in a different time and place, where and when would you want to live?
 - If you could spend an afternoon with a famous person (living or dead) who is your pick?

If there's little time for you and your family to enjoy food and fellowship together, here's a final thought: Imagine viewing a movie through your VCR on "fast forward." You could "see" several movies in the time it takes to watch one at the normal speed. But, would you enjoy them as much? If your family's life is being lived in "fast forward," maybe it's time to hit STOP! Or PAUSE—for several meals a week!

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