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Connecting Big Plans' Parents to their Communities

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It's Science: Eat Dinner Together

As a family therapist, I often have the impulse to tell families to go home and have dinner together rather than spending an hour with me. And 20 years of research in North America, Europe and Australia back up my enthusiasm for family dinners. It turns out that sitting down for a nightly meal is great for the brain, the body and the spirit. And that nightly dinner doesn't have to be a gourmet meal that took three hours to cook, nor does it need to be made with organic arugula and heirloom parsnips.

BRAIN FOOD

For starters, researchers found that for young children, dinnertime conversation boosts vocabulary even more than being read aloud to. The researchers counted the number of rare words – those not found on a list of 3,000 most common words – that the families used during dinner conversation. Young kids learned 1,000 rare words at the dinner table, compared to only 143 from parents reading storybooks aloud. Kids who have a large vocabulary read earlier and more easily.

Older children also reap intellectual benefits from family dinners. For school-age youngsters, regular mealtime is an even more powerful predictor of high achievement scores than time spent in school, doing homework, playing sports or doing art.

Other researchers reported a consistent association between family dinner frequency and teen academic performance. Adolescents who ate family meals 5 to 7 times a week were twice as likely to get A's in school as those who ate dinner with their families fewer than two times a week.

DOES A BODY GOOD

Children who eat regular family dinners also consume more fruits, vegetables, vitamins and micronutrients, as well as fewer fried foods and soft drinks. And the nutritional benefits keep paying dividends even after kids grow up: young adults who ate regular family meals as teens are less likely to be obese and more likely to eat healthily once they live on their own.

Some research has even found a connection between regular family dinners and the reduction of symptoms in medical disorders, such as asthma. The benefit might be due to two possible by-products of a shared family meal: lower anxiety and the chance to check in about a child's medication compliance.



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Parents Learning About Needs and Skills

4108 Montgomery View NW
Calgary, AB T3B 0L9
Phone: 403-685-4229 Fax: 403-685-4227

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wordpress.com



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It isn't just the presence of healthy foods that leads to all these benefits. The dinner atmosphere is also important. Parents need to be warm and engaged, rather than controlling and restrictive, to encourage healthy eating in their children.

But all bets are off if the TV is on during dinner. In one study, American kindergartners who watched TV during dinner were more likely to be overweight by the time they were in third grade. The association between TV-watching during dinner and overweightness in children was also reported in Sweden, Finland and Portugal.

SOUL FOOD

In addition, a stack of studies link regular family dinners with lowering a host of high risk teenage behaviors parents fear: smoking, binge drinking, marijuana use, violence, school problems, eating disorders and sexual activity. In one study of more than 5,000 Minnesota teens, researchers concluded that regular family dinners were associated with lower rates of depression and suicidal thoughts. In a very recent study, kids who had been victims of cyberbullying bounced back more readily if they had regular family dinners. Family dinners have been found to be a more powerful deterrent against high-risk teen behaviors than church attendance or good grades.

There are also associations between regular family dinners and good behaviors, not just the absence of bad ones. In a New Zealand study, a higher frequency of family meals was strongly associated with positive moods in adolescents. Similarly, other researchers have shown that teens who dine regularly with their families also have a more positive view of the future, compared to their peers who don't eat with parents.

WHAT'S SO MAGICAL ABOUT MEALTIME?

In most industrialized countries, families don't farm together, play musical instruments or stitch quilts on the porch. So, dinner is the most reliable way for families to connect and find out what's going on with each other. In a survey, American teens were asked when they were most likely to talk with their parents: dinner was their top answer. Kids who eat dinner with their parents experience less stress and have a better relationship with them. This daily mealtime connection is like a seat belt for traveling the pot-holed road of childhood and adolescence and all its possible risky behaviors.

Of course, the real power of dinners lies in their interpersonal quality. If family members sit in stony silence, if parents yell at each other, or scold their kids, family dinner won't confer positive benefits. Sharing a roast chicken won't magically transform parent-child relationships. But, dinner may be the one time of the day when a parent and child can share a positive experience – a well-cooked meal, a joke, or a story – and these small moments can gain momentum to create stronger connections away from the table.



Reprinted with permission: <https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/food-for-thought/science-eat-dinner-together> (Written by Bri DeRosa). FDP website: www.thefamilydinnerproject.org

fun and games while making dinner

Including your kids in making dinner can teach them lessons about food and responsibility that will last a lifetime and it can also be the most fun part of the dinner. Here are a couple activities geared to kids ages 2-7 years from thefamilydinnerproject.org to help your family laugh all the way to the table:

MAKE WHIPPED CREAM

If you like the idea of making something out of nothing, then you'll enjoy this recipe.



Place whipping cream in a tightly covered container (test the tightness of the lid first, to prevent wardrobe disasters). Then, you shake the daylight out of it. You can put on music and dance with it. Pass it from person to person and do the hokey pokey if you like! When you're done, the cream thickens to become whipped cream. Save it for dessert if you can resist. Serve with berries or other fruit!

EXPLORE MYSTERY FOODS

Take your children to the supermarket and ask them to pick out a fruit or vegetable they have never seen before or never eaten at home. Incorporate this new food into a meal!

conversation starters for family dinners

A well-worded question is the quickest way to connect after a long day. We call them starters because we imagine they will spark a deeper conversation about the things that matter to you. thefamilydinnerproject.org has some great ideas to get you started:

- * What is your favorite thing to do outside?
- * What is one thing you did today that helped other people?
- * Name three things that are fun for you.
- * Who did you play with today?
- * If you had an extra room in your house, what would you use it for?

Promoting Mental Health Tips for Parents

Helping kids grow up mentally healthy is an important part of parenting. Here are a few things you can do to support good mental health in your kids.

PUT YOUR DEVICE DOWN. When you are with your children, show them that they are more important than your electronic device. Lead by example: put your own devices aside and spend face-to-face time with your kids.

LISTEN WHEN THEY'RE UPSET. When children are upset, they just want you to listen and understand how they're feeling. Try not to jump in with advice or reassurance. Listen is spelled with the same letters as Silent.

FOCUS ON THEIR STRENGTHS. Support your children's self-esteem by helping them to see their own strengths. Show that you see and appreciate kindness, empathy and trying hard, and not just achievements like good grades. For example, "That was kind of you to think of your brother" or "You worked so hard on that and you didn't give up!"

<http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/Promoting-Mental-Health-parents>



Cineplex Entertainment, in partnership with Autism Speaks Canada, is delighted to present Sensory Friendly Screenings. This program provides a sensory friendly environment for individuals with autism spectrum disorder and their families to view new release films in theatres across the country. Cineplex Odeon Sunridge Spectrum Cinemas will be hosting these screenings in Calgary, AB. These screenings are presented in a lights up, sound down environment and will take place approximately every 4-6 weeks on Saturday mornings at 10:30AM. Ticket price is the child admission price for any guests attending these screenings. Tickets will be available the

Tuesday prior to the screening date.



**"HOP"
SATURDAY,
MARCH 31, 2018**

[http://cineplex.com/
Theatres/SensoryFriendly](http://cineplex.com/Theatres/SensoryFriendly)

Autism Calgary Parents Connecting Support Group

This group is for caregivers of children 0 to 10 years old on the autism spectrum that have been diagnosed or are just going through the process of diagnosis. Join this group to connect with other parents, get support, ideas and/or information about resources, schools and services to this age group.

Groups run on the 4th Tuesday of the month, 7-9 pm

Autism Calgary, 3639 - 26th Street NE, Phone: (403) 250-5033
For more information contact laura@autismcalgary.com



At home Activity

Two Self-Esteem Boosters for Children

At a quiet point of the day, or in the evening, before tucking your child into bed, you can play the "I'm proud of you game". To do this, simply say to your child: "I'm so proud of you. Do you know why I'm proud of you today?" Have your child try to guess. When they give you an answer, simply reply, "That is a great reason but not the one I'm thinking of", until your child has listed four or five positive things about themselves. End the game by giving your child a hug and telling them their last guess was right (or better yet, come up with your own reason)!

Trace your child on a big piece of paper or have your child draw themselves. Then, ask your child to tell you their strengths. Draw or write these on the paper. Examples: "I have strong hands, my feet help me to run, my mouth asks for what it needs, etc." The list will reinforce the positive things about your child and the picture will be a terrific reminder!



Free things to do with Kids in Calgary



For some inexpensive indoor OR outdoor fun, check out Calgary Playground Review at www.calgaryplaygroundreview.com. Not only will you find a listing of a variety of playgrounds (indoor and outdoor), but you will also find family friendly places to eat, attractions and travel. The website includes reviews, photos and maps. A fabulous resource for families!

15 TIPS FOR PICKY EATERS

Do you know kids who are picky eaters?

You've come to the right place! Here are some of our favorite tips for conquering picky eating! Of course, I will only be able to scratch the surface of the issue, but the main point I've taken away is that all of our sensory systems play a role in eating. Picky eating is a natural part of child development. It is quite normal for a two-year old to absolutely refuse to eat anything green, anything with skin, or anything mushy. The question becomes: **What are you going to do about it?**

First and foremost, as Ellyn Satter says in her book *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, you need to "change your thinking away from 'my child WILL eat this' and instead go with the attitude that you are going to go where your child takes you today. Parents are responsible for determining when and where a child eats NOT how much. Try not to hold on so tight to the quantity and type of food your child is eating. Let it go."

1. Write a Social Story — Talk frequently about where you will eat, what you will eat, where the food you eat might have come from, what awesome changes happen in your body when you eat well. For example: Tonight we're having dinner at grandma's house! Grandma is making stir fry. You can even try eating your stir fry with chopsticks! There will be some broccoli on your plate. Broccoli has vitamins in it that can make your bones strong and keep your body healthy!

2. Teach About Food — Borrow books from the library, explore www.choosemyplate.gov or My Plate Kids Place at www.acefitness.org

3. Look at Positioning — Does your child have good supported posture so that she can focus on eating instead of holding herself upright? This is especially important for any child with developmental delays. Are her feet supported on the floor or on a bench so that her knees are at a 90 degree angle? Is the table at the right height so that her arms can rest comfortably without having to reach way up high? Does she have adequate support at her trunk and back to keep her from feeling like she will fall out of the chair?

4. Play With Your Food! — Make an effort to play with food that your child may be resistant to. Being able to touch an unfamiliar or undesirable food is a big step in the right direction when the ultimate goal is to get that food into a child's mouth. Blow pieces of popcorn or roll peas across the table, build with pretzel sticks (Jenga-style!), etc. You can also play games like What's in Ned's

Head? using real food. Make a mystery box for your child to reach into and feel different foods. Can he guess what he is feeling? Can he describe it?

5. Practice smelling foods — The sense of smell helps to create the flavors that we taste in food. This is the reason that when we have a cold, nothing tastes quite right. Keep in mind that when you heat foods, they smell stronger! If your child is sensitive to smells, serve food at room temperature.

6. Cook With Your Kid — Getting in the kitchen with your kiddo is the perfect way to provide interesting, playful experiences with food (and it's a great way to spend some time together too!)

7. Warm Up the Senses — Since eating is a full body sensory experience, try warming up before mealtimes with some oral sensory, olfactory, or tactile play!

8. Take Baby Steps — Start by encouraging your child to tolerate a non-desired food on her plate for a certain amount of time, not necessarily in her mouth. Set a timer if necessary. Can she try touching the food with her finger? Smelling it? What about touching it to her lips?

9. The Two-Container Trick — Say your child hates peas but loves macaroni and cheese. Try sending her to school with two small containers of that mac and cheese. In one container, mix a tiny sample of peas into that yummy, cheesy pasta. Your child may choose not to eat that container because it has peas in it. OR they may be sooooo hungry, that they want to eat both containers, in the process realizing that those peas aren't so bad after all! This adds another element of control for your child.

10. Know When to Say When — Make sure to establish a clear way for your child to request to be finished with the meal. This could be as simple as a verbal request — "I am done". Or, it could be a gesture or sign (e.g. setting his fork down beside his plate, using sign language, or shaking his head "no"). Whatever you and your child determine the signal to be, respect it — even if you don't feel as if he has had enough.

11. Watch and Learn — Try eating with your child in front of a mirror — children are visual learners. You can also show videos of other children eating or cooking different types of foods.

12. Pay Attention to Body Language — If a child is leaning away, has his hands up in front of his face, or is turning his head away from a food, respect the message that he is sending!

13. Limit Visual and Auditory Distractions — This means turning off the TV, putting cell phones away, and maybe even moving away from a family-style dinner table with lots of food presented at once. Think about using lower lighting. Playing slow tempo music that matches breathing and heart rhythms (60 bpm) can also promote relaxation.

14. MoveIt! — If the child just can't seem to sit still for mealtime (rocking, bouncing, tipping back in the chair— try some vestibular activities before meals. Input like this can last up to 4-6 hours and can be done way ahead of a busy mealtime.

15. Know How the Body Works — Think about the body awareness, coordination, and motor planning it takes to get your hand to your mouth! Kids have to be able to grade their movements, using appropriate force and timing to be able to feed themselves. You may take this for granted, but for little ones, it can be tricky! Check out the cups and utensils your child uses. How heavy or light are they, and how does this affect the way they eat?

Kids are smart! Provide them with the tools they need to feel comfortable, in control and empowered and they may just surprise you! Remember that eating is a full body sensory motor experience and that feeding difficulties can be complex.

**If your child is demonstrating such a limited diet or such extreme unwillingness to try new foods, it may be time to get some help. If you've tried the strategies above, or if you are seriously concerned about your child's nutrition and weight, always trust your instincts and talk to your pediatrician.*

Written by Lauren Drobnyak - co-author of The Inspired Treehouse blog and a pediatric physical therapist who currently practices in the educational environment. Reprinted with permission theinspiredtreehouse.com

