



## The Importance of Family Mealtime

Family mealtime 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. NEP encourages families to cook together, eat together, talk together, and make mealtime a family time.

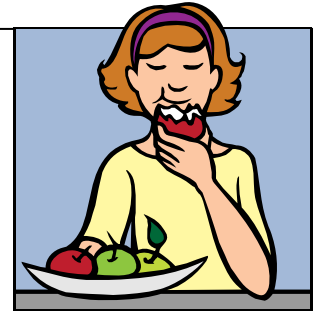
### The benefits of family mealtime

- **Relationships**- Eating together helps build a close relationship with your children. It gives everyone in the family a chance to learn more about each other. Turn off the TV and do not answer the phone during mealtime. Instead use this time to talk, connect, and make memories together. It is a lesson your children will use for life.
- **Better Nutrition**- Meals prepared at home are usually more nutritious than meals eaten while dining out.
- **Portion Sizes**- Children learn about correct portion sizes, food groups, and nutrition when eating with their family. Let the children learn by serving themselves at dinner. Teach them to take small amounts at first. Tell them they can get more if they are still hungry.
- **Stability**- Eating with your child gives them a 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. It is cheaper to cook meals at home than it is to dine out.
- **Cooking Skills**- Get everyone involved in meal preparation. Kids love to help prepare food. 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 conversation skills.
- **New Foods**- Offer your children new foods, but do not 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.

Know how. Know **now**.

## Keys to enjoyable family mealtimes

- **Have a healthy snack ready-** Arriving home from school or work may be hectic and children may be ready to eat right away. Have a healthy snack ready for kids to enjoy before dinner time.
- **Make mealtime timely-** Kids need time to sit down and eat their food, but it does not have to take a long time. Sitting for too long can lead to irritability and decrease mealtime enjoyment.
- **Meals do not have to be fancy-** Meals for the family do not have to involve a lot of preparation and time. They can be pre-made meals or simple recipes such as grilled cheese, apple slices, and tomato soup.
- **Plan ahead to save time-** For example, cook double the amount of meat you need on Monday night, so that you can use the extra precooked meat for Tuesday's meal.
- **Be a good example-** Your children are more likely to eat a variety of healthy foods if they see you doing it first. Try to include food from each of the five food groups.



## Family mealtime challenges

- **Watching television-** When eating dinner, turn the television off. It may be a struggle at first, but children will get use to it and enjoy the time they have to talk with their family.
- **Family members do not think mealtimes are important-** Ask them to give it a chance and explain the importance of togetherness and good nutrition.
- **Work and children's activities-** Make mealtime a priority and a routine. Mealtime can be any meal throughout the day. Breakfast may be the best option for some families.



- **Family members do not like the same foods-** Allow children to express their feelings about food they like and dislike and let them pick the meal a few nights a week. Get them involved in preparing the meal. It will make them more eager to eat the meal.
- **Out of ideas-** Contact NEP or your local Extension office for food preparation resources. There are also many free food preparation cookbooks and resources at local libraries and on the Internet.