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Family Meal Times

Issue 5

Improving Family Communication with Family Meals

At the Family Table

Good communication has been called "the lifeblood of any meaningful, close relationship." Communication is the foundation of our interactions with others.

Research on strong family relationships consistently has shown that good family communication is one of the cornerstones of a healthy family life. Few family traditions can be as helpful in providing opportunities for communication as family meals.



Communication Benefits of Family Meals

Family mealtimes provide a built-in opportunity to visit with other family members and enjoy good conversation. Regular conversation in a natural setting helps family members learn the give-and-take of effective communication. Some of the communication benefits associated with family meals include the following:

- A regular time to meet each day and talk with each other about thoughts and feelings
- An opportunity to learn how to ask and respond to questions
- A chance to share stories and ideas from each family member's experiences
- A time to practice manners, listening and taking turns in conversation

Tips for Communication at Family Meals

Consider these tips to help family members make communication at family meals a positive experience:

- Clear the table and turn off distractions, such as the TV or phones, so you can focus on visiting together.
- Ask questions that encourage conversation, such as "What was the most interesting thing that happened to you today?" or "What should we do for our family vacation?"
- Try to encourage conversation among family members but set a reasonable time for being together, such as 30 to 40 minutes.
- Keep the conversation positive. Avoid making the dinner table a time for lectures, angry discussions or discipline of a child.
- Allow every person a chance to talk and share thoughts or stories so that all have a positive experience.
- Bring up an occasional conversation starter, such as a current event or a favorite joke or story.
- Encourage family members to linger for conversation, with dessert or snacks, so everyone can relax and enjoy talking with each other.

A Memory of Family Meals

"We all sat in the same spots. Now when we get together (after being scattered and grown up) we sit at the same spots. If one is missing, we leave the chair empty."

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Food and Family Q&A

Question: ***I grew up in a family where family meals were not a fun experience. I'm trying to change that for my own children. What do you suggest?***

Family meals are no fun if the communication is harsh, uncaring or distant. Simply having a family meal together doesn't mean someone will avoid poor behavior. So encourage positive behavior when communicating at family meals. Try the following:

- Ensure that children avoid teasing or rude behavior toward each other.
- Avoid criticism and anger during family meals. Instead, encourage compliments and kind words for each other.
- Shut off distractions, such as the TV, and focus on each other.
- Treat each other's views with respect, even if you disagree. Listen to children and let them learn to give ideas and listen to others.

Question: ***My kids don't always like the food I prepare. They only want corn dogs and chicken nuggets. What can I do?***

Involve children in meal planning and preparation. Have children select recipes from cookbooks and "take charge" of that meal. Kids are hands-on people, so have them help with age-appropriate tasks rather than watch. If children help plan and prepare foods, they are more likely to taste them, too.

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A Family Meal Recipe

Easy Turkey or Chicken Pot Pie

1 c. cut-up cooked turkey or chicken
1 16-ounce bag frozen vegetables, thawed
1 (10.75-ounce) can reduced-fat condensed cream of chicken soup
1 c. biscuit mix (such as Bisquick)
½ c. low-fat milk
1 egg

Preheat oven to 400 F. Stir turkey or chicken, vegetables and soup in an ungreased 2-quart casserole dish. Stir the remaining ingredients until blended. Pour over the turkey or chicken mixture. Bake uncovered about 30 minutes to an internal temperature of 165 degrees, until the crust is golden brown.

Makes six servings.

Each serving has 230 calories, 6 grams (g) fat, 14 g protein, 30 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber and 490 milligrams sodium.

Menu Idea

Easy Turkey or Chicken Pot Pie, tossed salad, apple crisp and low-fat milk

Quick Tip: Perishable foods should spend no more than two hours at room temperature.

Eat Smart. Play Hard. Together

For more information about food and families, visit this NDSU Extension website: **www.ag.ndsu.edu/food**

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