



Synithia Williams
Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Investments to Chew Over

Families, riddle me this...

*What is round,
usually centered on the kitchen floor,
and has been found
to not get the use it once did before?*

The *dinner table* for generations has been a fixture that supported family meals and served as the centerpiece for many family conversations. Recent research studies suggest, however, that this long-time staple could rapidly be approaching endangerment. Over the past twenty years, family mealtime has decreased 33%. As parents are working harder and longer and children's schedules are growing more crowded, this trend faces further decline. Consideration of the key benefits associated with family mealtime may offer parents some food for thought.

SAVINGS

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average U.S. family spends \$2,668 annually alone on dining out. Dinners prepared at home, on the other hand, are significantly less expensive among other benefits than those prepared at restaurants. In light of the current economy, many households have begun to more carefully monitor their spending habits and have revisited the traditional family mealtime at home more regularly. A household may actually find their budget on total food purchases can be cut entirely in half through incorporating more dinner table dining and less convenience meal buying throughout the year. Through advance planning, food purchases can become less impulsive, thus offering families overtime multiple benefits regarding budget and more.

INVESTMENTS

Could there be a magic hour within the day? Considering some of the investments associated with family mealtime, this may not be such a far-fetched notion.

▪**Improved Nutrition:** Research shows families that eat regular dinners at home together consume more vegetables, fruit and juice and less soda. These families also generally consume less fatty foods and higher amounts of fiber, minerals and vitamins essential to the body. Frequently shared mealtimes also have been shown to guard against obesity in children and eating disorders in preteens and adolescents. Overall healthier eating habits are easily garnered as families take control of food preparation and consumption and begin to regularly integrate this time into their weekly schedules. Child nutritionists offer some caution with food in general regarding force and reward eating and/or providing food to calm children who are hurt as these practices could lend to eating disorders.

▪ **Well adjusted children:** Several studies reveal a link between regularly shared mealtimes and positive child adjustment on indicators such as academics, healthy child development and teen drug use. CASA, National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, reported that teens within households that have two or fewer family dinners per week are twice as likely to smoke daily and to get drunk monthly as compared to those who have family dinners five times per week. With attributes such as greater vocabulary growth and higher academic achievement as well as lesser incidences of depression and difficulty getting along with others being found in children with regular family dinners, research suggest that shared mealtimes establishes a platform with many direct and indirect benefits regarding children’s physical health as well as mental and emotional health.

▪ **Strong Relationships:** Quality time together to share and connect is a key hallmark of healthy relationships between husbands and wives as well as parents and children. Creating this time may be challenging for families; yet, many find the family dinner uniquely serves up a prime opportunity with minimal distractions for such connections. This small window of time has been correlated with positive communication, less stress as well as feelings of greater attachment among family members that share mealtime consistently.

Synithia Williams, regional extension agent in family in child development with Alabama Cooperative Extension System, says that “family dinners can be simple, yet regular proactive investments into combating issues that families face and a tradition many grow to appreciate.”

RECIPE FOR FAMILY DINNER SUCCESS

1. Measuring and Balancing Demands: With varying schedules and demands, many families enlist the entire family in pulling off dinner. As this time is established as a priority, each member may find their special way to contribute and/or sacrifice to ensure that it occurs. One of the best and often fun tools in family dinner success is menu planning. Creating weekly or monthly meal plans help direct grocery buying and preparation as well as alleviates much of the associated hassle.

2. Mixing up Meals: Recipes ideas are not hard to acquire. With technology, many ideas and even cooking tutorials are now a click away. Whether the idea comes from a book, television show, shared recipe or is a conglomerate of leftovers, family meals do not have to be large and time consuming. It may take some advance planning and preparation on occasions, yet the experienced or novice cook can easily prepare a healthy meal any day of the week that is time economical and healthy for the entire family. Alabama Cooperative Extension System offers some meal ideas for families. Visit the St. Clair County Extension office or website for meal planning publications.

3. Adding in Good Conversation: As an ingredient, conversation is the spice to the meal. Many great family dinner conversations gradually begin with discussions of the best and worst parts of each other’s day and then chart their own unique course thereafter. Studies show, however, that nearly ½ of families have the television on during dinner and 1/3 eat in front of it which can detract from connecting. To best establish an atmosphere that is conducive to sharing, removal of necessary distractions and potential interruptions is vital. Families may decide to let voicemail answer phone calls as well as employ similar measures during shared meals to take full advantage of this special time together. Williams suggests that “although various topics can be discussed over dinner, families should be mindful to preserve this time primarily as a highlight and positive experience for all.”

The benefits of the family dinner are celebrated annually as National Family Day observed in September encourages families to eat with family at the dinner table and similarly National Family Week in November encompasses Thanksgiving Holidays. Consider investing some time to explore the magic of family dinner time today and often. For more information on meal planning, check out these publications from ACES:

Weekly Menus for the Entire Family

Weekly Menus for Two

Menu Planning in 12 Easy Steps.

For more information on this or related topics, please contact Synithia Williams, Regional Extension Agent in Family and Child Development for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System at (205) 338-9146 or willisl@aces.edu.