

# Making Family Meals Less Stressful

► For a lot of families, the idea of *family meals* can seem daunting. The term often makes people think of elaborate meals that take hours to prepare. This does not have to be the case. A family meal is simply a meal that your family sits down and enjoys together. It can be as simple as a frozen toaster waffle, milk, and fruit.

Family meals are about more than just the food on the table. Eating meals together as a family, at least three times per week, provides a variety of benefits. Some of these benefits for the children and adolescents in the family include higher academic performance, increased self-esteem, decreased depression risks, and decreased risk of substance abuse.

Family meals also have several nutrition-related benefits. Family meals are associated with lower risks of eating disorders and lower rates of obesity.

To add to these benefits for your family, serve these meals family style. What does this mean? Put all of the components of your meal in the center of the table, and allow your family to serve themselves. Maybe provide a little help to the younger children.

Family-style meals are the secret to less stressful mealtimes and increased variety in your child's diet. It may seem counterintuitive to allow children to serve themselves, but it works. It allows children to be exposed to a variety of foods and gives them a sense of control. That sense of control encourages them to try new foods because it is their decision. It also helps when they see their parents or other family members try the foods as well.

The key to family-style meals is to remember that the parents' job is to offer a variety of nutritious foods. It is not their job to force the child to eat any or all of the foods. The child's job is to decide which foods to eat and how much. Forcing children to try foods or clean



their plates can increase picky eating and other food-related issues. Instead, encourage them to eat based on fullness. Allow them to stop eating when they are full, not when their plate is empty.

What does this look like in real life? Take taco night, for example. Put the meat, cheese, avocado, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, or whatever you are serving right in the middle of the table, and allow your children to create their own tacos. When serving new foods or foods prepared in a new way, serve a familiar food as well. This lets everyone have a food they know they will enjoy as well as a new food to try.