

Let's Reclaim Dinnertime Together Denton County!



Part 1

Last week I spoke with two women about family dinners. One woman said, "I'm lucky if my family eats together 3 times a week." The other woman replies, "We haven't used our kitchen table in weeks. *If* we eat together, it's because we are watching the same TV show." Sound familiar? Here's an update of the national trends on family meals:

- Over 50% of families surveyed nationally report eating together 3-5 times a week.
- As children grow up the frequency of family meals declines. Twice the number of 12-year-olds (55%) as 17-year-olds (26%) report eating dinner with their families 7 days a week.
- About 27% of families reported eating meals together 7 days a week while about 23% of families ate meals together 2 or fewer days a week.

So what difference does it really make? Well, maybe more than you think. The list of benefits and reduced risks associated with eating together as a family are tremendous, especially for children and young teens.

A positive relationship exists between the following child wellbeing indicators and eating family meals together (as family dinners increase, so do positive child wellbeing outcomes):

- Academic achievement
- Language development
- Vocabulary growth
- Commitment to learning
- Positive values
- Amount of sleep
- Fruit and vegetable intake (children and adults)

What's more, as the number of family dinners together goes up, the following high-risk behaviors go down:

- Substance use
- Sexual activity
- Behavior problems in school
- Depressive symptoms
- Body mass index/ body mass index percentile (children and adults)
- High fat/sugar intake (children and adults)
- Disordered eating

In fact, the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse reports that teens having family dinners fewer than three nights a week are at two to four times the risk for substance abuse compared to teens who have dinner with their families five to seven nights per week.

There is no single daily activity that we do as a family with more regularity and no better opportunity to develop the physical and mental health of your family, especially from childhood into adolescence. If you think you're too busy to invest the time, think again.

Here's my challenge to you Denton County: **Choose just one more night this next week to invite your entire family for Dinnertime Together.** For college students, single professionals, and empty-nesters, broaden your scope of family to include neighbors and friends. Some of the indicators above apply to adults too. Share your experiences at (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Love-to-Live-Well/137396776328115>).

Looking for ways to make dinnertime easier? Come hear the first workshop in the Reclaim Dinnertime Together series. Love to Live Well and Texas AgriLIFE Extension Service will host these events to give you even more tools to make dinnertime easier. Each workshop runs 6:30 -8:30 pm and costs \$25:

- March 29th: Reclaim Dinnertime Together
- April 26th: Crockpot Cookin'
- May 24th: Cookin' with Kids

Register for the workshops at www.lovetolivewell.com. Find more free tips and strategies to make this challenge easier, an invitation to the family, and references for this article posted at www.lovetolivewell.com. Join the county-wide campaign to make Denton County healthier one dinner at a time. *Bon Appetit!*

Love to Live Well offers nutrition counseling, health coaching, and group classes aimed at helping people eat better, move more, and stress less. Supermarket tours, fridge and pantry health makeovers, family wellness packages, and weight loss programs for individuals and groups are just a few of the services offered. With social responsibility at its core, Love to Live Well gives back to the local community through free seminars and free/low-cost tools provided on the website (www.lovetolivewell.com).

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606 words (According to MS Word) not counting article title or name/title



Part 2

Last issue I discussed the impact of family dinners on the development for mental and physical health of children and adolescents. Sitting down to enjoy meals together is an investment in a child's future. Love to Live Well and Texas AgriLife Extension Service are committed to help. "Wellness opportunities" are all around this community, but this one starts at home! Here are some steps to make this easier:

1. Plan for success

- Allow everyone to contribute to the conversation and keep the conversation polite.
- Choose a day when the least amount of extra-curricular activity happens.
- Don't feel guilty if it's not *at* a dinner table. Your Dinnertime Together could be at a park or the lake or a restaurant or even in a car, but just make sure that everyone has disconnected from technology and reconnected to one another. Make Libby Spears proud!

2. Set the tone

- Lay some ground rules: Make the dinner table a technology-free zone (MP3 players, laptops & tablets, electronic games, cell phones off and stowed).
- Have a beginning and end where everyone stays and talks until all are finished eating. The best child outcomes are related to well-organized and regulated mealtimes.
- Have your family help you set the mood and the table with placemats, napkins, flowers, candles, or centerpieces. Play soft music in the background low enough to hear the conversation. Have each person choose music so all family members have their *own* night.

3. Prepare to start the conversation

- Use some conversation starters to get people talking.
 - What was your favorite part about school/work today?
 - What did you think about that?
 - How did that make you feel?
- Sometimes silence is golden—enjoy the peace of just BEING together with your family. Don't feel like you have to fill the void.

4. Focus on quality, not quantity

- I'm surprisingly *not* talking about portions here. Quality of conversation is the strongest predictor of language and literacy development. Complex conversations with storytelling and rich explanations are the best! And guess what? They're more entertaining too.

- Engage in adult conversation. Don't reduce language for kids. Just look for a word in your conversation that younger kids may not know and define that word for them. That's how they learn!
- Express genuine concern and interest in one another's day (use the rule of empathy). There's your first conversation starter: What is empathy?

Here's my challenge to you Denton County: **choose one night this next week to invite your entire family for Dinnertime Together.** Let's start a conversation about reclaiming dinnertime together. Share your experiences at (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Love-to-Live-Well/137396776328115>) Please join us in this county-wide campaign to make Denton County healthier one dinner at a time.

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