



Make Time for Meals Together as School Year Starts

As the school year starts, families often spend less time eating meals together because of busy schedules.

However, family meal times are important because they foster good communication among family members. Research shows that when families eat together, children are more likely to have nutritious meals and less likely to snack on unhealthy food. Children who often eat with family also tend to have fewer behavioral problems.

Everyone in the family is likely to have a different schedule, so instead of hoping for family meal times to happen, it's crucial for everyone to sit down and figure out a good time to eat together. Even a family meal once a week is better than none at all.

Most people think of an evening meal when talking about family meals, but keep in mind that breakfast and lunch are good times for everyone to get together if schedules are freer in the morning and afternoon.

Another obstacle to family meals may be finding time to plan and prepare the meals. Remember that family meals don't have to be complicated or take a long time. Quick recipes can be found on the UNL Extension Recipe Central:
<http://food.unl.edu/web/fnh/recipe-central>.

Also, a little planning can save time later. For example, before grocery shopping, make a shopping list of foods that can be combined or used for multiple dishes throughout the week. It's easier to decide what to cook if you have gotten all the ingredients you need.

Weekends are great for prep work when there's some extra time. For example, make ground hamburger in advance and then use it for casseroles, pastas and other dishes during the week. Weekends are also a great time to cook a big meal that can be frozen in smaller portions and eaten throughout the week.

Another tip is to involve children in food preparation. Kids will be more excited about mealtimes if they get to be involved. Younger children can help set the table, fold napkins or pour beverages. Older children can wash produce or mix ingredients together. Teens can even be put in charge of cooking for a meal while the adults help out around the kitchen instead.

Finally, make meal times pleasant and free of outside distractions, such as technology. Turn off the TV and cell phones so that everyone can have an hour to sit down at the table and share some face-to-face interaction without interruptions.