



THE FAMILY DINNER PROJECT

Your Guide to Hosting a Community Dinner: Virtual Edition



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Looking for a fun way to help families in your community have healthier, more meaningful meals? Organizing a Virtual Community Dinner can help you do just that! As part of this guide, you'll find tips and materials for both hosting and facilitating a successful event.

We get it. Hosting a Virtual Community Dinner can feel daunting at the outset. Our guide and accompanying resources are designed to provide you with answers to any questions you may have throughout the process (and if you come up with a question that we don't cover—*let us know!*).

What is a Virtual Community Dinner?

A Virtual Community Dinner is an online event that brings together different families in the same community, school, or organization. The families may already know each other, or they may be meeting for the first time. Families come in all shapes and sizes and all are welcome.

Why should we host a Virtual Community Dinner?

What if there was one change you could make to improve your kids' vocabulary, resilience and self-esteem, while decreasing their likelihood of eating disorders, teen pregnancy and substance abuse? What if just one change could positively impact their minds, bodies and spirits?

Regular family dinners have been shown to significantly impact all of these.

Hosting a Virtual Community Dinner is

a great way to bring people together for food, fun and conversation and jumpstart new family dinner habits. Community Dinners help families learn to have healthier, more meaningful meals using a fun and structured model that's easy to follow. After the event, families will have lots of new tips and tricks they can use at their own dinner tables to improve their well-being, one dinner at a time.

Is hosting a Community Dinner difficult?

Hosting any kind of group event requires planning and organization, but our Virtual Community Dinner model is simple and effective -- and it can be customized to your unique needs. Everything you need to plan a successful event is included within the following pages!



Planning Your Virtual Community Dinner LET'S GET STARTED!

Prep Notes

Who?

The community is a key part of having a Community Dinner! Make sure to communicate early and often with the people you invite to your event.

- Send reminders so families don't forget! Consider using email, Eventbrite or Facebook to make it easy and convenient.

What?

Every TFDP Community Dinner follows a basic agenda of food, fun and conversation. Check out our [sample agenda](#) in this guide and use it planning your dinner.

When?

A Community Dinner doesn't have to be a "dinner" at all; you could make it a breakfast or picnic lunch if that works best! Plan to have guests there for about 75 minutes.

How?

We've got all the resources you need to help you pull off a great event! In this guide you'll find:

[Community Dinner Checklist](#)

[Forms For Your Function](#)

[Facilitator's Guide](#)



PICKING YOUR PLATFORM

Facetime

- *Pros:*
 - Free
 - Allows about 30 people on chat
 - High quality and fun filters
- *Cons:*
 - Only available to Apple users

Zoom

- *Pros:*
 - Easy to use
 - Good video quality and chat feature
 - Allows users to join by phone if video is not an option
 - Allows up to 100 guests and has features like “breakout rooms” that can be used with smaller groups for games or side conversations
- *Cons:*
 - Free accounts only allow up to 40 minutes of connection at a time
 - For meetups lasting longer than 40 minutes, you’ll need a paid account (starting at around \$15 per month)

Google Hangouts

- *Pros:*
 - Free
 - Allows up to 25 people
 - Guests only need a Google account to join
 - Allows guests to join by phone if video is not an option
- *Cons:*
 - Video feature can lag or freeze
 - Works best in Chrome browser

Skype

- *Pros:*
 - Free
 - Allows up to 25 people
- *Cons:*
 - Users have to download the Skype app and create an account to access, or use “Meet Now” with app installation if they don’t have an account



Food

It's the first ingredient in food, fun and conversation -- but what should you serve? When you're planning a Virtual Community Dinner, you could certainly agree that each person will make their own meal or order take-out. But for a truly shared experience, here are some virtual menu planning ideas you might try:

Do a show and tell.

If each person makes an individual meal, start the experience with a food “show and tell!” Let each guest show what they're eating, and share why they chose to make that particular dish. If something looks good, you might want to share links or send around an email afterward to swap recipes.





Make a set menu.

You could also choose the menu for the virtual dinner, just as if you were eating together at an in-person Community Dinner. You could send the recipes to everyone ahead of time. Each person would make the recipes on their own, and show their results when you meet. For quick, budget friendly recipe ideas check out our program, [*Dinner Tonight: Budget Friendly*](#).



Create a theme.

Themes can be a great way to unite people around a shared food experience when they're not actually in the same room. You could choose a color, and tell guests that everyone's meal has to be red or green. Or you might give a country or region of the world. Specific dishes are good for themes, too -- Pizza Friday or Taco Tuesday -- or you could ask everyone to make a dish that represents their family heritage or culture.

You can really get imaginative with the theme if you're up to it. If everyone enjoys a certain show or movie, make that your dinner theme, with costumes to match! Suggest a literary night and make Harry Potter meals and dress in your "house colors." This idea can really add to the fun of the evening if you've got a willing group, but it's also important to know your audience before you get too attached to a big creative idea.

TIP: *To reduce barriers to participation (and make it less stressful for families), send participants a giftcard to cover the cost of their meal. If you'd like families to share the same meal, send each family a "meal kit" with a recipe and the necessary ingredients so they can all cook the same thing. If resources are tight, try partnering with a local restaurant, nonprofit, or grocery store.*



Fun

Fun might be the most important ingredient for a successful Community Dinner! Food brings people to the table, but fun is the thing that keeps them there -- and makes them want to share a meal with others again and again.

To keep the fun flowing:

Before the meal:

Select one or two [Games](#) to demo for families to enjoy while your guests are gathering.

During the meal:

Provide families with some additional game ideas while they eat, so they can try them out during your event.

After the meal:

Choose a few [group games](#) that you can play in a breakout room or share [art activities](#) for kids to do while adults are engaging in a grownups-only discussion.



Conversation

“Help...What do we talk about?”

As anyone who’s ever struggled with “How was your day?...Fine...” knows, conversation starters are a crucial part of setting the scene for a great shared meal. Keep the awkward silences and one-word answers at bay:

Send families conversation starters for the dinner table.

Email these [*conversation starters*](#) and have families print and use them at the dinner table during the event.

Encourage people to get to know each other better through interviews!

Email these [*interview sheets*](#) or [*interview placemats*](#) and have families print and use them at the dinner table during the event.

Send families home with more conversation ideas!

Consider sharing [*Recipe for Conversation cards*](#) after the event for use at home.



Enjoy and Share!

To make sure you enjoy the event as much as your guests, it's smart to enlist some help! Try to make sure you have someone available to fill each of these roles:

Greeter/Platform Organizer

This person (or people) is the technical host of the virtual event and makes sure all the releases are filled out, takes attendance, and manages breakout rooms.

Facilitator

This is usually the host (that's you!). The facilitator keeps the event moving on schedule and runs the facilitated discussion portion of the evening.

Make sure to check out our Discussion and Facilitation Tips!

Kid Wrangler (Optional)

This person (or people, depending on the number and ages of the children) is in charge of entertaining the kids while the adults are having their discussion. If you're going to host live kids' activities, they'll be responsible for facilitating group games in the breakout rooms. If you're not going to be doing group games in real time during the event, this person can help choose age appropriate activities to send to families in advance.



Social Media Sharing Tips

DO:

- Tag TFDP, so we can see what you've shared! Facebook: @TheFamilyDinnerProject; Twitter: @FDP_Tweets.
- Share photos as long as you've got photo releases.
- Share before and after your event.

DON'T:

- Use names or identifying characteristics of people who attend your event.
- Share photos of people without their consent.
- Share the negatives! Keep your social sharing fun and positive, just like your Community Dinner!



Digest

After a great meal, it's always important to take some time to let everything settle! Follow up on your Community Dinner within a week of the event:

- Let us know how it went! Send your final attendance count to TFDP so we can keep track of how many families have enjoyed Community Dinners around the world.
- Consider doing it again! If you enjoyed your Community Dinner, you might want to host another in the future.

- Thank your guests. Send everyone a follow-up email to let them know how much you appreciated their attendance. Include a summary from your facilitated conversation and give them some options for connecting with TFDP so they can keep working towards their family dinner goals. **We've provided a sample email you can use.**.....

Thank you!

Thank you for hosting a TFDP Community Dinner! People like you who spread our mission through events are vital to the work we do. If you have any questions, please [*contact us.*](#)



PREPARATION

Sample Community Dinner Agenda

Every TFDP Community Dinner includes food, fun and conversation. Here's a sample agenda to show you how the event might flow.

6:30 PM

Guests check in

6:35–6:40 PM

Facilitator welcomes everyone to the event

6:45–6:50 PM

Icebreaker and game demo

6:50–7:10 PM

(About 20 minutes)

Families eat dinner

7:10–7:20 PM

Kids activity transition

7:20–7:40 PM

(About 20 minutes)

Discussion for Adults
Children's Group Games/Activities

7:40–7:45 PM

Wrap-up and thanks

Total Time: 1 hour 15 minutes



Community Dinner Planning Guide

4 Weeks to Event:

- Pick a date
- Invite families
- Find volunteers
Note: The number of volunteers will depend a bit on how many families will be invited. We suggest at least 2-3 volunteers.
- Identify a plan for dinner (set menu with recipes, gift cards for groceries, etc.)

2-3 Weeks to Event:

- Determine where food will come from
Tip: There are often groups willing to provide food, like local restaurants, community gardens, or even grocery stores.
- Schedule the evening
Tip: It's helpful to have a clear plan for the night, but be prepared for things to go differently. With technology, flexibility is key. Our [sample agenda](#) is a good starting point.
- If using mail, send out print resources to families
Tip: Check out the [Fun section](#) of our website for ideas of which resources to send to families ahead of time.

1 Week to Event:

- Reach out to families that will be attending the event
Tip: Check out our [pre-event sample email](#) for a good starting point.
- Check in with the team (volunteers, facilitator, etc) and do a technology run through, if needed
Tip: Make sure everyone knows times, dates, expectations, and any other logistics that are necessary for the event. Go over the schedule so everyone is on the same page.



Community Dinner Planning Guide

Day Before Event:

- Review the agenda

Day After Event:

- Send family thank you email with links to TFDP resources and event survey

Up to 1 Week After Event:

- Send TFDP your final head count and any stories you want to share
Tip: If you have any pictures or great anecdotes from the event, you should share them with the TFDP team as well so they can publicize your work!





Once you've decided on a platform, set the mood by inviting everyone with flair! Whether it's a fun email or a designed virtual invitation from an "e-invitation" service, you can get everyone excited by making your dinner announcement special.

Be sure to include these key details:

- **Event time**
- **Joining information (including links to the event, dial-in information, and access codes)**
- **What to expect**

If you're playing games that will require access to a website or collecting household objects ahead of time, say so! And if you are going to be making specific recipes, include that information here as well.

And this is the perfect opportunity to set expectations about timing up-front. Provide a start and end time, and let guests know to expect during the event.

Community Dinner Sample Email Invitation

SUBJECT: You're invited to a virtual Community Dinner!

BODY TEXT:

[Organization name] is thrilled to invite you and your family to a virtual Community Dinner on [date] from [time]!

Research shows what parents have known for a long time: Sharing family meals is good for the spirit, brain and health of the entire family. The benefits of family meals include: better academic performance, higher self-esteem, a greater sense of resilience. In addition, children who eat dinner with their families have lower risk of substance abuse, depression, disordered eating and rates of obesity.

At the Community Dinner, families will share a meal, enjoy some fun games and conversation and will chat with each other about family dinners. We are looking forward to getting to know each other, having fun and sharing some tools to improve our family meals!

If you and your family are interested in joining us for a night of food, fun and conversation, please contact [name] at [phone or email address] by [date].

Space is limited, so we look forward to hearing from you soon. We hope to see you there!

[Insert signature here]

[Name] [Title]

[Organization]



Community Dinner Sample Pre-Event Reminder Email

SUBJECT: REMINDER - Virtual Community Dinner next [insert date here]

BODY TEXT:

Dear [name here],

We are thrilled you have agreed to join us for food, fun, and conversation at our Virtual Community Dinner on [insert date here]. In this email, you will find materials that we will use during the event, recipes that you can make for dinner ahead of time, as well as [insert any other attachments or information you've included here]. *[optional language if you've sent a gift card to cover the cost of the meal: Please use the gift card to purchase take-out from a favorite local restaurant or to buy ingredients to prepare food at home if you wish. What you're eating that night is not as important as enjoying the meal together!]*

We understand that attention in a virtual setting is limited so we have intentionally created a shortened event that will last approximately 75 minutes. To make this happen, we need your help:

Please sign into this Zoom link promptly at [insert time here]:

[insert zoom link information here]

Family dinner time commences at [insert time here]. Please feel free to use one of the attached recipes (not required) and plan accordingly.

Cut the attached Conversation Starters out and place in a container prior to the event.

Community Dinner Sample Pre-Event Reminder Email: Con't

[Use this language if hosting live kids' activities] Please have a second device available to log onto Zoom. Kids will be divided into age appropriate groups and their breakout sessions will be facilitated by [insert name here]. (Teens may not find the breakout activities as engaging as younger children and may wish to use this time—20 minutes—for themselves before gathering back with the group. They are totally welcome to participate in a group, however.)

[Use this language if not hosting live kids' activities] After dinner, parents will participate in a 20-minute facilitated conversation with [insert name here]. During this time, please have alternative activities planned for your children. Need ideas? The following activities for all ages are attached here to get you started:

- *[Insert list of activities you've picked out for families here]*

If you have any questions and need clarification on any of this information, please feel free to email me at [insert email here] or call me at [insert phone number here]. See you on the [insert date or day of the week here]!

On behalf of [insert organization here],

[Insert signature here]

Community Dinner Sample Follow-Up Email

SUBJECT: Thank You!

BODY TEXT:

Dear [insert name here],

Thank you for attending our Virtual Community Dinner event! We hope you enjoyed the time we spent together, along with the food, fun and conversation, and that you were able to take home some ideas to add a little spice to your family mealtimes.

It can take some effort to work new plans into everyday life, but we're here to support you in making family dinners happen more! Don't worry about trying to make it perfect or trying to do everything at once. Remember: just making a couple manageable changes can make a huge difference.

For more support and resources to make your family dinners the best they can be, connect with [organization name] and The Family Dinner Project (TFDP) online! Connect with The Family Dinner Project online using the links below:

- Subscribe to their [monthly newsletter](#);
- Get your free membership to “[Dinner Tonight](#),” TFDP’s daily helping of food, fun and conversation with extra features and a personal dinner tracker;
- Follow The Family Dinner Project on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#);
- [Contact us](#) to find out how your family can be featured as a “Family of the Month!” on The Family Dinner Project’s website.

Happy food, fun and conversation,

[Insert signature here]



**FORMS FOR
YOUR FUNCTION**

Release Form for Virtual Community Dinner Participation

I, the undersigned, do hereby consent and agree that [Insert organization name here], its employees, or agents have the right to take photographs, videotape, or digital recordings of me beginning on [Insert event date] and ending on [Insert date here], and to use these in any and all media, now or hereafter known, and exclusively for the purpose of their website, literature, promotional and fundraising activities. I further consent that my name and identity may be revealed therein or by descriptive text or commentary.

I do hereby release to [Insert organization name here], its agents, and employees all rights to exhibit this work in print and electronic form publicly or privately and to market and sell copies. I waive any rights, claims, or interest I may have to control the use of my identity or likeness in whatever media used. I understand that there will be no financial or other remuneration for recording me, either for initial or subsequent transmission or playback.

(Optional language if hosting kids activities) I also consent to allowing my child(ren) to participate in a separate virtual session to partake in [Insert organization name here] planned children's activities. I understand that I accept general liability for the participation of my child(ren) in these activities, and that I agree to indemnify and hold harmless [Insert organization name here] its employees, and other participating agents, either jointly or severally, from and against any and all claims, injuries, damages, losses, costs, or causes of action that may arise in connection with this activity.

I also understand that [Insert organization name here] is not responsible for any expense or liability incurred as a result of my participation in this virtual event, including medical expenses due to any sickness or injury incurred as a result.

I represent that I am at least 18 years of age, have read and understand the foregoing statement, and am competent to execute this agreement.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Signature: _____

Guardian's signature if person is under age of 18: _____



SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS



Facilitation Tips & Tricks



The Facilitator directs the events for the evening and should be somewhat comfortable presenting information and leading group conversations. You will also be involved in helping families get started with their family activities and making them feel welcome, building rapport and trust with the families present. Engaging in conversation and connecting with the families is key to making the facilitated discussion portion of the evening successful.

After dinner, your role as the Facilitator is to lead a discussion and provide an opportunity for families to talk about challenges and solutions to having family dinners - to benefit from one another's real-life experiences. Your goal is to set the stage for a dialogue about family dinner: invite the sharing of what is working well, followed by challenges, and then solutions. Draw people out when they have something to say and try to get everyone involved and contributing.

TIP: We have found it super helpful to take notes to document participants' responses throughout the discussion.

Parent Discussion Outline

1. Why family dinner is important to me
2. A bit of research
3. What is working well for their family dinners
4. Gathering challenges
5. Good ideas to overcome challenges
6. Ideas from Family Dinner Project
7. Family Dinner Project Programs that can help



“What this means to me” (the presenter)

Begin by sharing how you got started with family dinners and how that has affected your life or why it interests you.

- What really inspired you?

- What keeps you invested?
- Why do you think it’s so important for families to commit to sharing dinners together?

What is working well

During this part of the discussion you are trying to get a sense of what is working well with families’ dinners and encourage them to share as part of the group discussion. Allowing the families to start with the positive will make it easier to have them participate and share their challenges as well. It is important for them to recognize the things they are getting right to help address some of their challenges. Be sure to document their comments!

Challenges

This is an opportunity to compile real challenges, and help parents see that they are not alone in their struggles.

Facilitator Question:



“As we all know, there are lots of things that can get in the way. What gets in the way of family dinner at your house? What do you find most challenging?”

Process:

Ask for comments from the group. Make a list of all the main challenges that arise.

Possible Conversation Sparks:

- I can’t keep my two-year old at the table.
- My kids fight when they are together for more than five minutes.
- Our schedules are too full; we can never find the time.
- I never have the time to get dinner together.
- My kids refuse to eat the same food I want to eat.





Solutions- Parents as Experts:

For every challenge a family in your community faces, chances are another family in that community has faced and overcome something similar. Gather good ideas from people that will help with one or two challenges. You might share some ideas from other parents you have worked with or from the TFDP website.

Facilitator Question:



“We have resources within this group to build a list of ideas to deal most challenges we have named. We don’t always know the resources are sitting next to us. By sharing our ideas, we begin to see the abundance that is all around us in our community, a resource we can continue to utilize long after this dinner ends. So let’s look at the challenges on the list and if you have run into a challenge and found a successful way of dealing with it, share the idea and let’s gather as many good ideas as we can.”

Ideas from FDP:

Take a look at the [FAQ portion](#) of our website and encourage families to check out The Family Dinner Project’s other free online programs - Dinner Tonight and Food, Fun and Conversation - as well as our blog, for tips on overcoming all sorts of challenges to family dinner.

Closing Comments:

After dessert, before everyone leaves for the night, remind them of Family Dinner Project resources. Briefly review what the [Dinner Tonight program](#) is.

