

The Family Dinner Project

Organizers' Toolkit



Welcome to The Family Dinner Project!

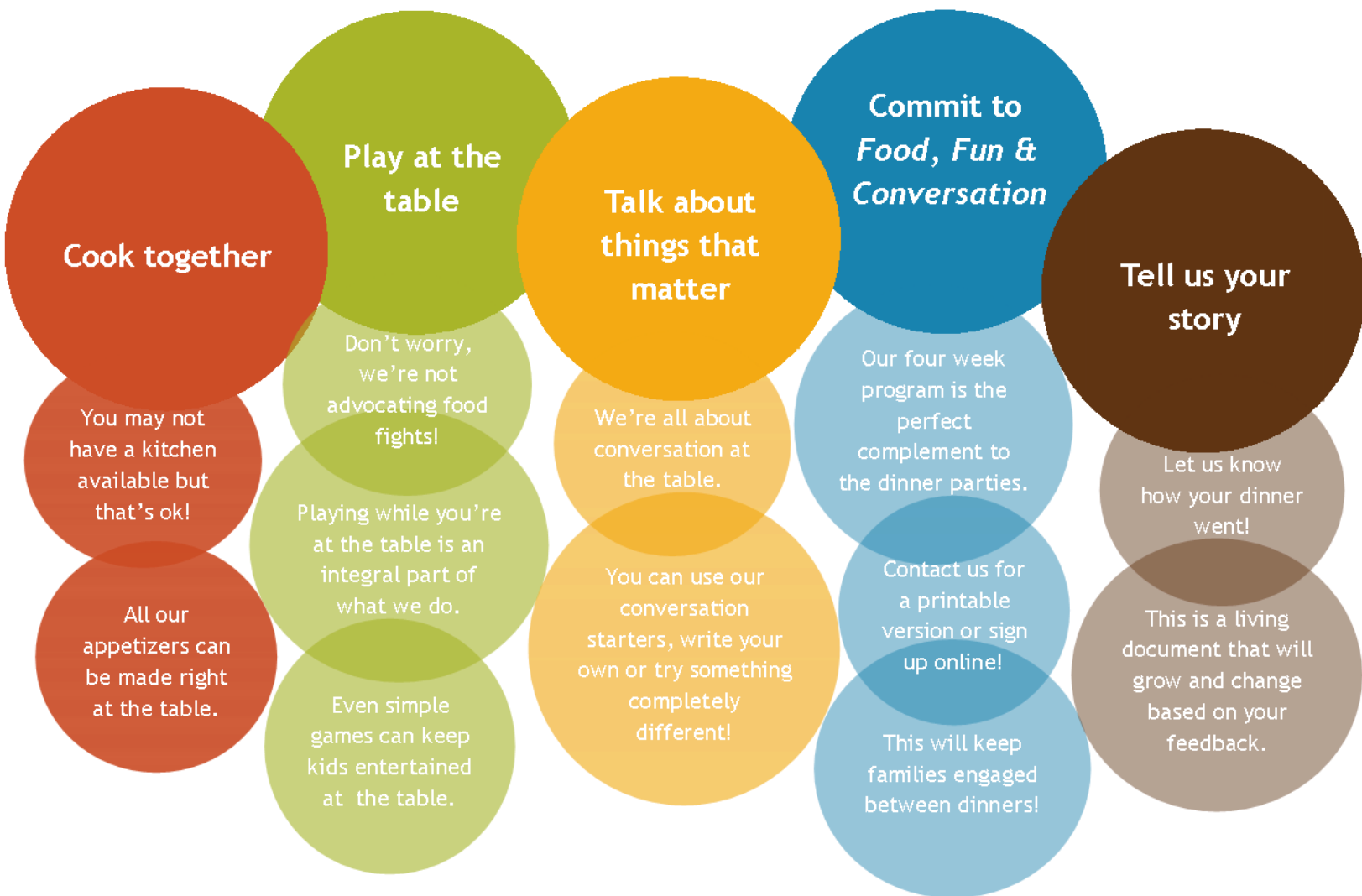
Looking for a fun way to help families in your community have healthier, more meaningful meals? Organizing a Community Dinner Series can help you do just that! Enclosed in this toolkit, you'll find tips and materials for planning successful community dinner events, including checklists and sample agendas, as well as recipes, games and conversation ideas.

For even more information and resources, check out our website: thefamilydinnerproject.org. Our Community and Family Blogs are filled with inspirational stories and wisdom from real families. We always love to hear from you, so please send us your story as well!

Essentials

We get it: Running a Community Dinner Series can feel daunting at the outset. This toolkit is 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!).

We've boiled down all the parts of a Community Dinner Series to 5 essentials. Everything else is just icing on the cake!



Why family 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 the above.

What are we hoping to do?

At The Family Dinner Project, we focus on food, fun and conversation about things that matter. Using these tools, the Community Dinner Series can help families in your area have higher quality, more frequent dinners together no matter what challenges they face.

How do we do this?

The Community Dinner Series is a fun, interactive way to get whole families on board with dinner. Together, families cook, play games and dive into meaningful conversation. Committing to this project as a community helps families feel supported. It allows them to learn from each other's challenges and successes, and encourages them to stick with the project.



Over the past few years, we've found that the Community Dinner Series works best with three dinners (one dinner a month for three consecutive months). This gives each family time to practice having family dinners and create change on their own.

You don't need to stop at three if you want to do more! The Community Dinner Series can continue for as long as the families in your community would like.

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First Steps

The Organizers

At The Family Dinner Project, we believe in sharing the workload. Don't be shy about getting people involved: Ask for help and divide up responsibilities!

We run our community dinners with three people: a coordinator, a facilitator and a cook. Here is a possible division of the event tasks:

Facilitators: These people will lead the dinner event itself. Ideally, they will be comfortable presenting information and leading group conversations. It's nice to have more than one facilitator so they can take turns leading different portions of the evening. You may want to designate someone (or a few people!) to work with the kids during the pre-dinner and dessert activities.

Event Coordinator: This person manages the details of the evening. He or she will coordinate with the event space, make sure there are enough plates and utensils and generally oversee the planning logistics.

Food Coordinator: Whether the meal comes from a caterer or from the families themselves, it's helpful to pick someone to coordinate the food on the evening of the event.

Other Possible Jobs:

- **Greeter:** Someone to hand out nametags and get the ball rolling as people trickle in.
- **Cook:** While the facilitators lead discussions, this person monitors the food in the ovens and makes sure the meal is ready to go out to the tables.
- **Photographer:** Someone to take photos and videos of families cooking, playing games and having discussions. (Note: You may need to get permission to take photos and video! See our Release Form for Media Recording on page 36).
- **Clean-up:** Lastly, you'll need a team of people to coordinate the clean-up. The kids can help with this if they finish making dessert before the parent workshop is done.

The Leadership Families

This grass-roots movement needs its roots! Having a few engaged families at the core of your dinner series will help you organize each event. It will also get other families excited about the family dinner movement!

Here are a few ways to get families involved:

- Some organizers limit the events to the group of families throughout the community dinner series. Small groups can be more manageable, and having the same families at each dinner helps create a tight-knit community.
- Other organizers start with about five leadership families at the kick-off dinner, and then have each leadership family invite another family to subsequent dinners. This allows the organizers to start on a smaller scale and watch the movement grow.
- Others hold a kick-off dinner with their leadership families to introduce them to *Food, Fun and Conversation* (see page 33). **Each family then hosts a dinner with one other family at their home.** At the end of the three months, all participating families come together for a wrap-up dinner, to practice their new skills, enjoy delicious food and share their thoughts about the series.

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Location, Location, Location

Once you have interested people, you need a host location. This could be a church hall, school cafeteria or any other community space.

A few things to consider when choosing the location:

- It's helpful to have a **stocked kitchen** available. Ideally, you will have an oven to heat up the meal, as well as dishes, serving bowls and utensils. The more stocked the kitchen, the fewer headaches you will have getting ready for dinner. But don't despair if you don't have these items: you can always assemble guacamole or salad together, or make another no-cook meal.
- Make sure the space has **enough room**, as well as tables and chairs. Again, things will be simplified considerably if these are available on site.
- When booking the space, **talk to the person in charge** of the location about the dinner project. The more they support the project, the more helpful they will be in answering your questions and providing resources.

Checklists



Weekly Checklists

Feel free to
print these out!

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weeks to Event:

- ☐ Talk to the person in charge of the event location.
- ☐ Solidify date of event.

Pick a date at least a month away. Run the date by the contact person at the event location and your support team.

- ☐ Determine where the food will come from.

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Food can be provided by the families you have invited — make each family responsible for an ingredient. For example, if you plan to have enchiladas, one family can bring the cheese, one can bring the sauce, another can bring the meat or beans, another, the tortillas and the last, the dessert ingredients. If you have some money, you might be able to have the event “catered.” Since cooking together is an important part of the event, ask a restaurant to provide the unassembled ingredients. (They usually will for a significant discount!)

- ☐ Invite families.

You can explain your hopes for the evening with this invitation (see our sample invitation on page 16); it's a great chance to get people excited about the project. If you are planning to ask folks to share in the provision of food, mention this now. Also ask about food allergies.

2 to 3 weeks to Event:

- ☐ Determine your menu for the evening.

Select foods that can be prepared by families at the event (check out meal ideas on page 13). Choose something that can be prepared in advance, is easy to put together with children and can be reheated. Lasagna or enchiladas are great choices. Salad can be made from bagged ingredients and families can make their own salad dressing.

- ☐ Check out area resources for inexpensive or donated food.

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There are often groups willing to provide food, like community gardens, local farms or even grocery stores. Give them a call. Even if they can't donate food, they may have information about food, nutrition and local farmers' markets.

- ☐ Start to think about how you want your room to look.

Create a list of things you need (see page 11) and take a look at our suggested room set-up (page 12).

- ☐ Schedule the evening.

It's helpful to have a clear plan for the evening, but be prepared for things to go completely differently. With many families in one room, flexibility is key. See our sample agenda on page 14.

- ☐ Send participant surveys to each family.

Surveys are a good way to get a sense of where the invited families are starting from. They are also important to track progress during the program, helping you understand what effect you're having and what you may need to do more or less of. See our sample assessments on page 38. And, by all means, let us know what you find out! We assess our programs so we know what we're doing well and what still needs work.

1

week to Event:

- ☐ Contact families involved with event.

Tell them how excited you are for the event. Ask them how they are feeling. See if they have any questions or concerns. If they are responsible for some of the food, make sure they understand what to bring and any other instructions. (Does the cheese need to be grated? The chicken cooked?)

- ☐ Check out space if you haven't already.

Find out where things are located, like tables, chairs, light switches and outlets. Think about the layout of the room and where you will set up the dinner tables and food preparation stations (page 12).

- ☐ Check in with the team.

Make sure everyone knows times, dates, expectations and any other logistics that are necessary to the event. Go over the schedule so everyone is on the same page.

- ☐ Shop.

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Gathering the non-perishables this week will give you some time to find (rather than purchase) all the items. You may be able to borrow some items from the families involved, or use what is available at the hosting location. See item list on page 11.

Day before Event:

- ☐ Finalize food plans.

Check in with everyone to make sure everything is ready for tomorrow.

- ☐ Finalize the agenda.

It will help you to have a printed copy of how you expect the event to go. Again, this will probably change as the night goes on, but it helps to have a plan in place. Transitions tend to take longer than you expect; it will be helpful to know what you can do without if you fall behind.

- ☐ Print handouts/paperwork.

Your volunteers will appreciate having a copy of the schedule — make copies the day before.

Additionally, don't forget to bring information about *Food, Fun and Conversation: 4 Weeks to Better Family Dinners* for each of the families (page 33), as well as release forms (page 36) if you are planning on having any form of media present (filming and/or photography). If you are not using release forms, be sure to gather contact information some other way, such as a contact sheet at the door.

Item Checklist

☐ Tables: Round tables are best but rectangular ones will do in a pinch. Divide long tables into family sections or use smaller tables for each family.

☐ Chairs: Have a few extra chairs just in case grandma shows up.

☐ Dishes, glassware, silverware: Real dishes make dinner special—but paper is just fine, too. **It is easiest if you can host at a location with dishes available.** If not, they can be borrowed or rented at a reasonable rate.

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☐ Tablecloths: Something simple will do. **See if you can borrow from friends and family.** Don't be afraid of mismatching. Different tablecloths will give each table its own look and feel, and create atmosphere.

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☐ Serving utensils and dishware: Be sure to think through what you might need. For example, will each table need salad tongs? Or will the salad be served into bowls before it comes to the tables?

☐ Table decorations: Flowers, candles (real or battery operated) and name cards are great. Decorations can be anything that will make the table feel special, and show families how little touches can make a big difference. **See page 17 for easy, inexpensive pre-dinner activities that get kids involved in making the dinner table special.**

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☐ Napkins: Cloth or paper, be sure you have them!

☐ Salt & pepper shakers.

☐ Nametags: A great habit to get in to at the beginning of the night is to hand out nametags, so everyone can get to know each other.

☐ Markers/pens: Have them on hand for nametags and feedback cards.

☐ Hors d'oeuvres: Consider having a light snack out for families to munch on when they arrive.

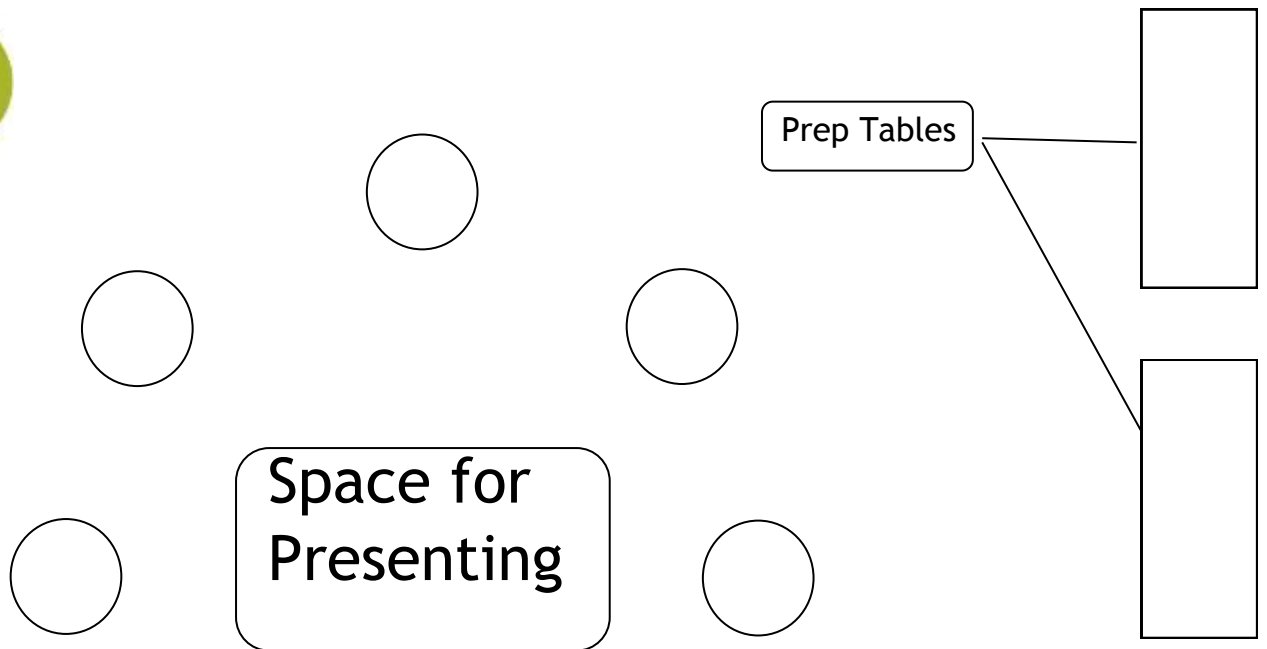
☐ Food containers: In order to allow each family a "station" for assembling their food, you will need to divide up the ingredients into containers. Disposable containers are great for this, as they come in multiple sizes and are inexpensive. Another option, of course, is using bowls and dishes you already have on hand.

☐ Tinfoil: For covering items before they go in the oven.

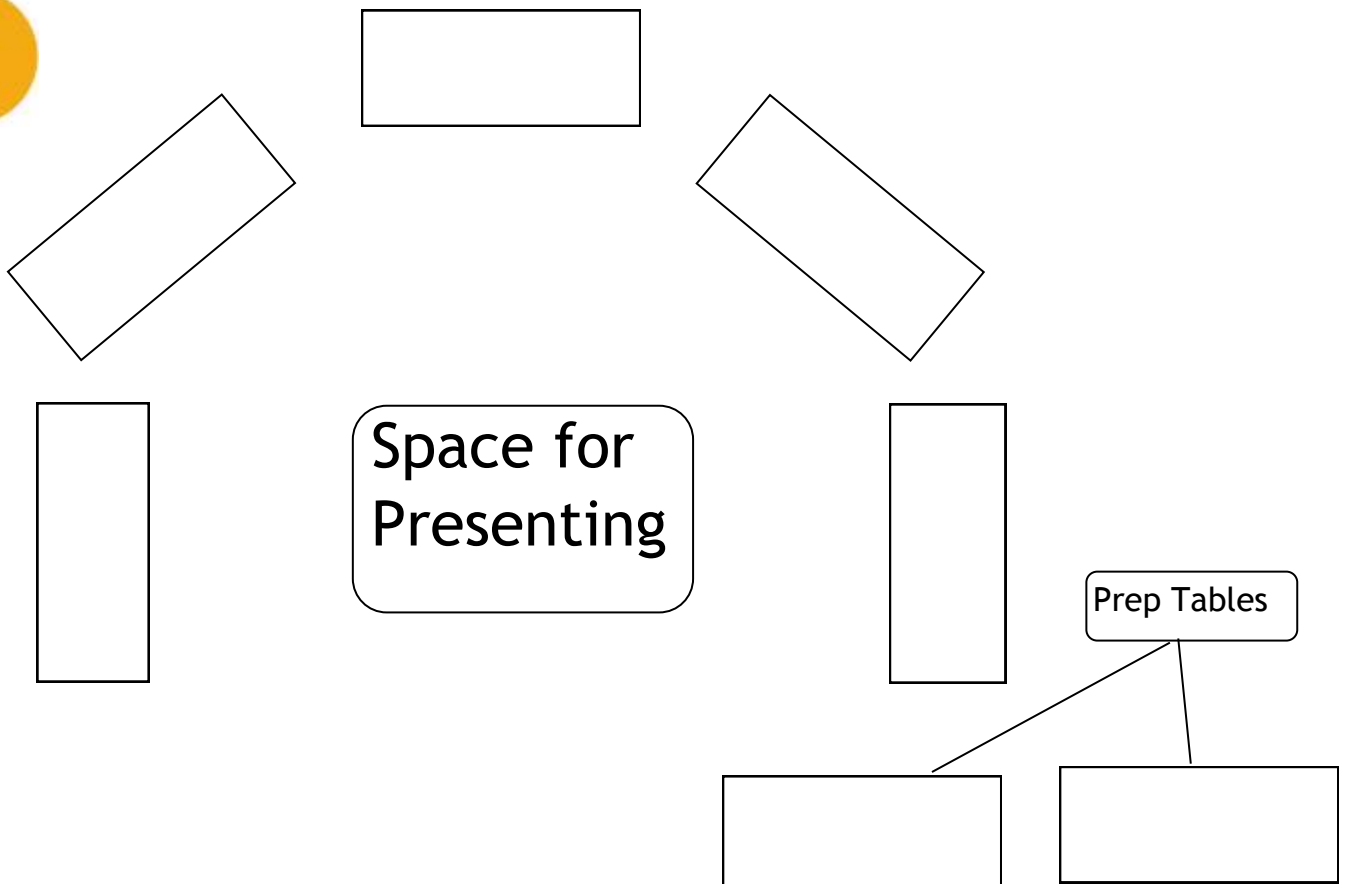
☐ Microphone or bell: Use it to get everyone's attention in a noisy room.

Room Set-up Guide

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Meal Ideas



Whether you've got an oven or not, we've got ideas for your Community Dinner Series menu. Check out our suggestions and look at the Food page on thefamilydinnerproject.org for recipes.

Appetizers

Chips, Guacamole & Salsa: Easy to make, healthy to eat and no cooking facilities required!

Homemade Hummus & Veggies: Another fun, tasty appetizer that you can get kids to help make.

Rainbow Kabobs: On bamboo skewers, put together kabobs with multi-colored veggies (orange peppers, snap peas, cauliflower, cherry tomatoes, etc.)

Sides

Salad: Grab bagged lettuce, add some veggies and dressing and you're all set. Bonus points if you buy heads of lettuce and make your own dressing!

Whole Wheat Rolls: Perfect with soup or lasagna!

Green Beans: Steam 'em and toss 'em in a bit of olive oil, and voila!

Main Dishes

Pizza: Using pre-made crusts, each family can assemble and bake pizzas exactly the way they like them.

Enchiladas: Each family can customize their own dish. If all of the ingredients are pre-cooked it bakes in about 15 minutes.

Lasagna: A delicious and hearty option, but the cooking time is longer than our other meals. You'll have to modify your schedule to accommodate this dish.

Fajitas: This is a great option if there is no oven at your host location. Families can still make guacamole and salsa during the dinner and then assemble the main dish from prepared ingredients.

Quiche: Whip up the egg mixture together, then each family can choose which veggies, cheeses and proteins to bake into their own quiches.

Dessert Ideas for Children

Whipped Cream: One of our favorite dessert activities! Kids make whipped cream using plastic shakers with agitator balls or a small (tightly-lidded) plastic container. This is a great topping for fruit crumble, frozen yogurt, pudding or almost any other dessert.

Dipped Fruit: Dip seasonal fruit in caramel or chocolate fondue. Kids can cut the fruit, dip in the sauce and arrange platters for their families.

Fruit Salad: Have kids create a fruit salad. You can purchase melon ballers or kid-friendly knife sets (like crinkle cutters) so everyone can participate.

Instant pudding: A fun, no-bake dessert that kids can prepare.

Kick-off Dinner Sample Agenda

- 4:30** ▫ Arrive at host location
- 4:00-5:00** ▫ Meet with support team
▫ Dinner setup
- 5:00** ▫ Families arrive
- 5:00-5:15** ▫ Nametags
▫ Meet & greet
▫ Pre-dinner activity (see page 17)
- 5:15-5:20** ▫ Everyone takes their seats
▫ Welcome families & introduce yourselves
▫ Explain the night's agenda
- 5:20-5:25** ▫ Icebreaker (see page 18)
- 5:25-5:35** ▫ Introduce *Food, Fun and Conversation: 4 Weeks to Better Family Dinners* (see page 33)
- 5:35-5:40** ▫ Families wash hands (or use hand sanitizer or towelettes)
- 5:40-6:00** ▫ Family food preparation
- 6:00** ▫ Food goes into oven (if you have one!)
▫ Serve appetizer, salad, or soup
- 6:00-6:10** ▫ Activity: Kids interview parents (see page 19)
▫ Facilitator-led activity wrap-up
- 6:10-6:25** ▫ Main course served
▫ More conversations and games (see pages 20-24)
- 6:25-6:45** ▫ Parents' discussion (see page 25)
▫ Kids help with dessert
- 6:45-7:00** ▫ Dessert is served
▫ Closing comments (see page 26)
▫ Taking FDP home

This time will vary depending on your circumstances, but we think it's better to get there early and wait than to feel rushed at the outset!

It's great to have a quick activity at the beginning because some people will be early and some people will be late! This also helps focus the kids' energy towards the goal: helping with family dinners.

Some rooms are big, some voices are small. As a facilitator you may need to amplify people's answers so that everyone in the room can hear.

This timing will depend on your menu and the capabilities of your facility. For meal ideas, see page 13.

Ask each child: "Name one thing you learned about your parents growing up."

Having a separate room for parents and kids is really helpful at this point, so that kids can have tons of fun and parents can talk in a quieter space.

Revisit *Food, Fun and Conversation* and hand out materials to anyone who wants to sign up.

Materials and Resources

Feel free to duplicate and distribute these materials for your Community Dinner Series.





YOU'RE INVITED!

(school or organization) and The Family Dinner Project are thrilled to announce an exciting opportunity for the 2013 school year!

Your whole family is invited to participate in a
Community Dinner Series at (location).

Research shows what parents have known for a long time: Sharing family meals is good for the spirit, brain and health of all family members. The benefits of family meals include: better academic performance, higher self-esteem, 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!

Participation in the Community Dinner Series means that you and your family:

- Try out **Food, Fun and Conversation: 4 Weeks to Better Family Dinners**.
- Receive **tips and support** from The Family Dinner Project team.
- **Cook and eat together** at 3 Community Dinners held at (location).

Families will get hands-on time in the kitchen making a family meal. While we wait for the food, we'll enjoy some fun games and conversation. We are looking forward to getting to know each other, having fun and sharing some tools for dinners together.

The Community Dinners will be from 5 to 7 PM on (date 1), (date 2), and (date 3).

If you and your family are interested in participating, please contact (name) at (school or organization) by (date). Space is limited, so please respond soon!

We hope to see you there!

Pre-Dinner Children's Activities

Pre-dinner activities are a great way to get kids to help with the meal in creative ways and also keep everyone occupied until you're ready to get the dinner going with an Icebreaker (see page 18). This portion of the event will generally last about 15 minutes.

Conversation Cards: Print out a copy of the conversation cards (pages 20-22) for each family and let the kids each cut out and decorate a set.

Appetizer Demonstration: This is a good activity to kick the night off, and gives those families who arrive early something to do. Grab a few kids as volunteers and show them how to make a simple appetizer, like veggies and homemade hummus dip.

Centerpieces: Have children make centerpieces for each table with seasonally appropriate items like wildflowers, pinecones, etc.

Placemats: Bring some 11"X17" sheets of paper and let kids draw placemats for themselves and the members of their families. Decorate each placemat with crayons, markers, stamps and stickers. You can laminate these or use them a few times and recycle.



Icebreakers

We like to give families a small activity to break the ice at the beginning of a Community Dinner Series. This can be almost anything, so long as each family gets to share!

Here are a few examples. Have each family select a “representative” who will present the family name and:

- Favorite family food
- Favorite family activity
- Family motto: Have each family choose a motto or phrase that best describes them.
- Family rose and thorn: Have each family decide upon the highlight (rose) and most difficult part (thorn) of the week.
- One thing your family is thankful for.
- For a smaller group: Have each person say — in one breath — his or her name, favorite food and favorite activity.



Conversation Starters

Rose & Thorn: Ask everyone to tell the table about the rose (the best or most special part) and the thorn (the most difficult part) of the day.

Treat: Go around the table and share one nice thing you plan to do for yourself in the near future (for example, this weekend or in the next week).

Weather Report: Have each family member describe how the day went—but using weather forecasts as metaphors! For example, a difficult day might be “thunderstorms” and a wonderful day could be “sunny and 80 degrees.”

Kids Interview Parents: This activity gives kids a chance to learn about their family history, and allows adults a chance to reflect on the family dinners they had growing up. Questions for kids to ask the adults in their families:

- How often did you have dinner together as a family?
- Who sat where at the dinner table? Do you remember anything about why or how those seats were chosen?
- What was a favorite meal made in your family?
- Who did most of the cooking, shopping, serving, cleaning up? How was that decided?
- What did you talk about at dinner?
- What was most fun about dinnertime in your family?
- What was hardest or least fun?
- What did you want to carry forward from the family you grew up in?
- What did you want to leave behind from those experiences?

Family Dinner Interview for Children Under 6: Modified for youngsters.

- Ask your child if he or she can draw a picture of your family dinner table, showing who sits where.
- Ask your child if he or she can draw you a picture of your family dinner table when you were growing up. Tell your child where you sat, and where other family members sat.
- Talk to your children about what your favorite meals were growing up in your families. What made dinners fun? What wasn't fun about your family dinners growing up? Is there anything you want to do now with your family that you did in your own families? Talk to your child about these ideas.

Conversation Cards



Here are some conversation starters recommended by our team. You can cut out the cards and put them on the dinner tables, hand them out to families or simply use them as a guide. For a fun activity, kids can cut out and decorate these cards before dinner begins.

| | |
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| <p>What is one thing that happened today that made you feel ...</p> <p>(happy/silly/friendly/smart)?</p> <p>Pick an adjective, or answer them all!</p> | <p>If you could be an animal, what would you want to be? Why?</p> |
| <p>If you had 3 wishes, what would they be?</p> | <p>What is your earliest happy memory? If you were to write your autobiography, would you start with this memory or with a different story?</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>What is the craziest thing you've ever eaten?</p> | <p>Tell us a story about something that happened today at school and another story that you made up.</p> <p>We'll try to guess which is which.</p> |
| <p>What would you like to do this weekend?</p> | <p>What do you do to recharge after a long day?</p> <p>Do you typically get to do this every day? Why or why not?</p> |
| <p>What are you hoping to do this summer?</p> | <p>Think of a famous person you admire, and describe why you admire him or her. What is it he/she does that you respect?</p> <p>Would you want to be like this person? In what ways?</p> |

| | |
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| <p>Think of a famous figure you <u>don't</u> admire. This could be someone you once respected and have more recently lost respect for, or someone you have never admired.</p> <p>What is it about him or her that you don't admire? Why?</p> | <p>Imagine that you could meet either an historical figure or an imaginary character (from literature, from film or TV). Who would you want to meet and why? What would you want to ask him or her? If you could plan a day together, what would you do?</p> |
| <p>Can you tell me one thing you learned today that you think I might not know?</p> | <p>If you were stranded on a desert island, what three books would you bring with you?</p> |
| <p>If you could live during another time in history, when would you want to live? Why?</p> | <p>What one word would you use to describe yourself?</p> |

Games



Check out our website for a more complete list of games:
www.thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun

There are so many different table games you can play with your families to make mealtime fun. Our website (thefamilydinnerproject.org) offers a whole bunch, but here are some of our favorites:

2 Truths and a Tall Tale: Ask everyone at the table to say three things about themselves: two true things and one thing that's made up. The rest of the table will guess which is the tall tale. Sometimes this game is easier if everyone gets a chance to write down their three things before sharing.

Alphabet Game: As a group, choose a category such as animals, countries, singers or "people our family knows." One family member starts the game by naming a person/thing from that category that starts with the letter "A." Then the next person names a person/thing that starts with the letter "B," the next person finds something for the letter "C," and so on.

Story by Sentence: Tell a story together where each person only gets to contribute one sentence at a time. Take turns adding sentences to the story. If you need suggestions to get started, brainstorm together before beginning about a few things that should be included in the story: a city, a type of terrain (mountains, seashore, woods), some animals, an event (sports event, historical event, entertainment), a color and/or a food.

"Guess the Category" Game: Think of 5 things that "belong" to something. For example, a banana, a pair of shoes, a Harry Potter book, a pile of paperclips and a box of flooring. Then have the rest of the table guess what these things belong to (answer: things in the trunk of my car). With little kids, you can just ask them outright for a list of things in a category (example: name three things in your bed).

"Would You Rather...?": Take turns asking "Would you rather....?" questions. You can make up your own or check out our website for more ideas! Here are a few of our favorites:

- Would you rather be unable to speak or unable to see?
- Would you rather be invisible or be able to fly?
- Would you rather sweat melted cheese or always smell skunk?

Where in the World: Imagine everyone at the table has the gift of teleportation, but it only lasts for 24 hours. Where in the world would you go? Would you bring anyone with you? How long would you stay? What would you do there?

Higglety Pigglety: One person thinks of a rhyming pair of words, like Funny Bunny. Then the person gives clues that are synonyms for the two words – hilarious furry mammal. Additionally, the person clues everyone in to how many syllables each word is by using the phrases “higglety pigglety” (for 3 syllable words), “higgy piggy” (for 2 syllable words), or “hig pig” (for 1 syllable words). For example, Funny Bunny is a “higgy piggy,” but Old Mold is a “hig pig.” Everyone tries to guess. Whoever gets it first thinks of the next one.

Celebrity: This is a game of naming people in the public eye. The trick is: the first letter of the celebrity's last name dictates what the first letter of the next person's first name must be. For example, if the first person names “George Washington,” the next person might say “Walt Disney,” or another celebrity whose name begins with W. Keep going until someone gets stumped. Special challenge: if you can name someone whose first *and* last name starts with the same letter – like “Walt Whitman,” – then the direction you're going around the table in reverses. This game also works with geography – simply use the last letter of the place named as the first letter of the next place. For example, “Kentucky” could lead to “Yemen.”

Different Drummers: Pick one person to be the leader. The Leader begins tapping a beat on the table (or clapping). The others around the table begin tapping or clapping along with the Leader. The Leader can change the beat whenever they choose, and everyone else must follow suit. Then, without warning, the Leader stops drumming. The last person to stop drumming is out.

Facilitation Guide



This section contains a basic outline for how parent discussions can be lead.

Your Role: This is the time for families to talk about challenges and solutions; to benefit from one another's real-life experience. Your job is to set the stage: invite the sharing of challenges, ask for ideas about how to meet them, draw people out when they have something to say and try to get everyone involved and contributing.

Note: *This facilitated discussion is adapted from our parent workshop, which lasts an hour to an hour and a half, so it is only a taste of what could be a much longer discussion. It will seem short and will feel like you have just begun the conversation, but that is okay, because this is only the beginning.*

“What this means to me” (the presenter): Begin by sharing how you got started with family dinners and how that has affected your life. What really inspired you? What keeps you invested?

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

Facilitator Question:

“So between the research (see page 27) and our own personal motivations, we have a lot of good reasons to make family dinners happen more often. But 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 challenges your ability to get to the table together?”

Process:

Ask for comments from the group. Make a list on a blackboard, white board, or easel-sized pad of paper.

Possible Sparks:

- I can't get my two year old to sit at the table with us.
- 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.
- I hate cooking!
- My kids refuse to eat the same food I want to eat.

Sometimes people are hesitant to speak up right away in the group discussions. These are some common challenges that you can offer to get the ball rolling.

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 FDP 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 in the next 15 minutes.

Ideas from FDP: Take a look at the FAQ on page 40. Check out our website and the *Food, Fun and Conversation* Program for tips from The Family Dinner Project team on overcoming all sorts of challenges to family dinner.

Closing Comments: Before everyone leaves for the night, remind them of a few key things:

- Review *Food, Fun and Conversation: 4 Weeks to Better Family Dinners*.
- Explain that, as part of the program, they’ll receive weekly support emails.

Parent Discussion Outline

- 1) Why family dinner is important to me
- 2) A bit of research
- 3) Gathering challenges
- 4) Good ideas to overcome challenges
- 5) Ideas from FDP
- 6) *Food, Fun and Conversation*

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Contact Us

Got a great story for us? A question? Idea? Feel free to contact us — we'd love to hear from you!

Email

Grace@TheFamilyDinnerProject.org

Online



Phone

617.926.0207

Mail

The Family Dinner Project
46 Kondazian Street
Watertown, MA 02472

Tell us Your Story!



We want to learn along with you, and we'd love to know how our model is working in your community. Please take a moment to fill out the form below and return it to us so that we can reflect on your struggles and share your good ideas with other communities.

Your Name:

Location:

Event Date:

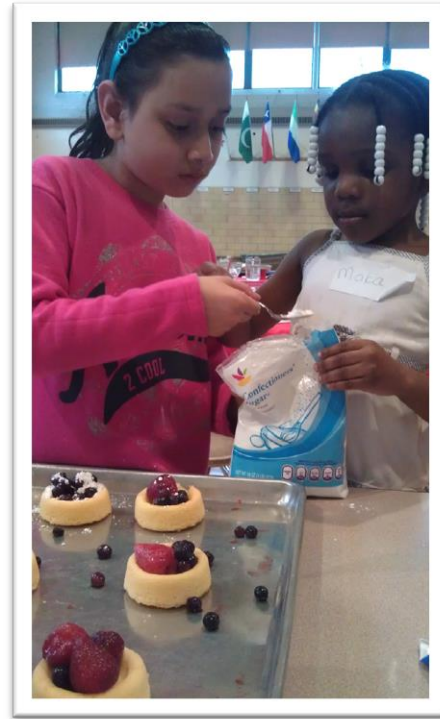
How did it go?

Positives:

Struggles:

Suggestions for next time:

APPENDIX



Research



Use the research in whatever way works best for you. You can put it in a handout, write it on a poster board or just talk it through with the families. See page 48 if you want to check any of these studies out for yourself.

Children who regularly eat dinner with their families show:

- Lower rates of substance abuse and depressive symptoms.
- Higher self-esteem and a more positive outlook on the future.
- Better body image.
 - Having 5 or more family meals per week lowered girls' risk of developing an eating disorder by 30%.
 - A survey of almost 5,000 ethnically diverse adolescents found that teens who had regular family dinners had healthier attitudes toward food, particularly related to dieting and binge eating.
- Better grades.
 - A Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) study found that adolescents who ate dinner with their families (3 to 5 times per week) were twice as likely to get As in school compared to classmates who rarely ate dinner with family.
- Greater consumption of vital nutrients from fruits and vegetables and less soda consumption.

Children develop the ability to hold complex conversations with multiple participants and families teach children to understand new words at the dinner table.

- Dinner table conversation is likely to be linguistically complex, cognitively challenging and very engaging, as opposed to other daily conversation. This sustained and focused conversation, often dealing with a single topic, is ideal for language development.
- Family dinners give parents (regardless of child's gender, socioeconomic status, or family composition) opportunities to praise children for successes, monitor children's whereabouts and discuss school.
- Family dinners also provide children with predictable structure.
- Children are given the opportunity at the dinner table to practice appropriate social behavior such as table manners and complex conversation.

But in spite of all these benefits, families are eating together less and less.

- There was a 33% drop in family dinners between 1981 and 1997.
- An average of 70% of meals are eaten out of the home.
- 9 in 10 Americans surveyed by Barilla's "Share the Table" project agree that their busy schedules make it harder to find time to connect in person.
- 69% of Americans report that some other activity is competing with the typical family dinner, particularly watching television and 58% of Americans report some type of technology or entertainment-related distraction.

Follow-up Phone Calls

Life has a way of getting away from us. This project is based on building a support system that resists the inertia of our lives. To keep the dinner momentum going, we suggest a couple of phone calls in the weeks between dinner events.

These calls can be quick check-ins to see how the goals are going or if the families have any ideas to offer. Share these ideas with the other families, or send them back to us to be posted on the website.

Week 2 phone call (first week following dinner):

Hi _____! This is _____, and I'm calling to see how your family dinners are going this week. Is this a good time?

I know it can take some effort to work new plans into everyday life. How is it going for you?

What questions do you have? What would you like help with or more information about?

What meals did you have this last week that the family really liked? Did the kids try any new foods or recipes?

What ideas have you come up with in the last week you that want to share with other families?

So, week 2 of *Food, Fun and Conversation* is all about making it simple — taking 2 concrete steps to make family dinners run more smoothly in your home. Don't worry about trying to make it perfect or trying to do everything at once. Just make a couple manageable changes.

It's best if everyone has input into what changes you make, too. By making this a family project, the other members of the family are more likely to stick with it and support each other.

What other help — if any — are you finding yourself wishing you had this week? Is there any way we can offer you support?

And have you had a chance to check out the website? It's thefamilydinnerproject.org. Good luck in the next couple of weeks! Feel free to give me a call if you have any questions in the meantime. We'll see you on the (next event date).

Follow-up Call Outline:

1. Greeting
2. Check in about last week
 - a. How did things go last week?
 - b. What can we do to help?
 - c. Do you have any ideas?
3. Week 2: Make it Simple
4. *Food, Fun and Conversation*
5. Looking to the next couple of weeks
6. Reminder about dinner
7. Reminder about website
8. Offer contact information
9. Good luck!

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Food, Fun, and Conversation



weeks to better family dinners

Whatever challenges you face, The Family Dinner Project's program *Food, Fun and Conversation: 4 Weeks to Better Family Dinners* offers help. Each week is centered on a different theme and has tools to help families reach their goals.

Introducing the program at your kick-off dinner is a great way for families to take the lessons home. After they've participated in the community dinner event, they may want to try this innovative dinner program.

Week 1: Make the Commitment

In the first week, families figure out what their goals are for the rest of the program. It's up to the individual families to figure out what is working and what is not. This week is a chance for family members to sit down to any type of meal and discuss their goals for the program. We provide resources that help families set goals, have conversations and commit to making change.

Week 2: Make it Simple

In the second week, we ask families to simplify dinner by making only two meaningful changes. The first is to choose something that is going well, and do more of it. The second is to choose something that isn't going well, and think of ways to get around that problem.

Week 3: Make it Fun

The third week helps families have fun at the table. Some families use theme nights or invite guests to dinner. Others decide to play a silly game that keeps the family laughing. We offer ways to make dinner special and enjoyable.

Week 4: Make it Matter

We hope that by the fourth week, families have created a safe space at the dinner table where they can talk about life lessons and other things that are important to them. It is through these deeper conversations that people grow, expectations shift and relationships flourish.

Maybe some things are going well and some things are more of a challenge — that's okay. Participating families have made the commitment to having dinners and are making an effort to talk and listen to each other. And after week 4, families can keep using the tools and resources from the plan, or create new games and conversation starters of their own. The possibilities are endless!

Forms & Assessments

We want to know what works best to help families have more — and more satisfying — meals together. We also want to help families track their own progress. Assessing the impact of our programs is a very important component of The Family Dinner Project's model, for us and for the families that join us.

The first piece of the assessment process is Informed Consent—we can't use information from people without their knowledge and permission. Contained in this section is a basic Informed Consent letter for participants to sign.

In addition, we provide two assessment resources developed by our team of researchers. The first is a Pre-Assessment, designed for families to complete before they attend the first community dinner. This will give you a picture of what your community sees as its goals and can provide a framework for your Community Dinner Series. The second is a Post-Assessment, designed for families to complete at the end of the Community Dinner Series.

This model of assessment allows you — and us! — to see the impact of participating in the Community Dinner Series and *Food, Fun and Conversation: 4 Weeks to Better Family Dinners*.

You can use the Pre-Assessment as part of the registration process before the event starts or hand them out as people walk in on the night of the kick-off.







Sometimes, handing out assessments can feel a little awkward. But keep in mind that this process is important so we can learn about the impact of the program and show potential funders that the program is working.

Food, Fun, and Conversation

1 2 3 4 weeks to better family dinners

Food, Fun and Conversation: 4 weeks to better family dinners works best when you measure your own progress. Your family can check or update at any time, and by the end of the 4 weeks, you will be able to see where you succeeded and where you can work a bit more.

Just mark your progress! 

| | Never  |  |  |  | Experts!  |
|---|--|--|---|---|---|
| Food | | | | | |
| Plan meals in advance | | | | | |
| Have fun preparing food together | | | | | |
| Eat nutritious meals | | | | | |
| Try new foods | | | | | |
| Fun | | | | | |
| Create a fun, inviting atmosphere | | | | | |
| Reduce distractions | | | | | |
| Tell funny stories and laugh together | | | | | |
| Play games at the table | | | | | |
| Conversation | | | | | |
| Learn about each other's day | | | | | |
| Make sure everyone has a voice at the table | | | | | |
| Talk about things that matter | | | | | |
| Talk about the kind of people we want to be | | | | | |
| Discuss the news, movies or books | | | | | |

Release Form for Media Recording

I, the undersigned, do hereby consent and agree that _____, its employees, or agents have the right to take photographs, videotape, or digital recordings of me beginning on _____ and ending on _____, 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 _____, 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.

I also understand that _____ is not responsible for any expense or liability incurred as a result of my participation in this recording, 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: _____

Can we contact you at this number to follow up between events? Yes: _____ No: _____

Statement of Informed Consent

Your participation: The purpose of the participant questionnaires is to gather information from the experiences of volunteers for _____ in order to improve the program, help you track your family's progress, and provide data about the project. Data and material generated from the questionnaire will be kept anonymous (unless you choose otherwise: see below), and used to support the mission of The Family Dinner project, and may be used in various printed materials such as, but not limited to, online publications, grant applications, and The Family Dinner Project materials.

What you will do: You will complete a self-administered questionnaire at the beginning of the Community Dinner Series, and another at the end of the Series. The questionnaire includes questions concerning your experiences and observations while involved in the Community Dinner Series. You may decline to answer any questions without reservation whatsoever. Should you have any questions or concerns about the questionnaire or about your participation, the Event Coordinator will address them.

Time required: Participation will take approximately ten minutes, depending on length of responses to the open-ended questions.

Contact: Questions or concerns about the interview should be directed to _____ (____-____-____) or _____ (____-____-____).

Agreement: The nature and purpose of this interview have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate.

- ☐ Permission for use of materials. By checking the box to the left and signing this consent form, I give _____ permission to identify my name in association with the comments I make in the above-mentioned questionnaire.

Printed name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

Getting Started with the Community Dinner Series

We're interested in your family's starting point when it comes to family dinners. Please take a moment to fill out this questionnaire before your first Community Dinner. At the end of the Community Dinner Series you will be asked to fill out a similar questionnaire. The information and feedback you provide as part of these questionnaires will ensure that The Family Dinner Project programs address the topics most important to the families involved.

1) How often do members of your family currently have dinner together?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely/only on holidays or special occasions
- ☐ 1-2 times per month
- ☐ 1-2 times per week
- ☐ 3-4 times per week
- ☐ 5 times per week or more

2) Please rate your current family dinners on the following scale.
Use the scale for EACH item (every item will have a number):

- 1= Never**
- 2= Rarely**
- 3= Sometimes**
- 4= Often**
- 5= Almost Always**

- ☐ Plan meals in advance
- ☐ Have fun preparing food together
- ☐ Eat nutritious meals
- ☐ Try new foods
- ☐ Create a fun, inviting atmosphere
- ☐ Reduce distractions (cell phones, television, etc.)
- ☐ Tell funny stories and laugh together
- ☐ Learn about each other's day
- ☐ Make sure everyone has a voice at the table
- ☐ Talk about things that matter
- ☐ Talk about the kind of people we want to be
- ☐ Discuss the news and how issues relate to our lives
- ☐ Enjoy each other's company

3) Circle three items you would like to learn more about and work on as a family.

- Plan meals in advance
- Have fun preparing food together
- Eat nutritious meals
- Try new foods
- Create a fun, inviting atmosphere
- Reduce distractions (cell phones, television, etc.)
- Tell funny stories and laugh together
- Learn about each other's day
- Make sure everyone has a voice at the table
- Talk about things that matter
- Talk about the kind of people we want to be
- Discuss the news and how issues relate to our lives
- Enjoy each other's company

4) Why did you sign up for this program—what interested you about it?

5) What do you hope to experience and learn from your participation in the Community Dinner Series?

Reflecting on the Community Dinner Series

Congratulations on completing the Community Dinner Series!

This questionnaire is designed to be completed after your Community Dinner Series has ended. It provides you a chance to reflect on your goals and what has changed (or stayed the same) since you began working with The Family Dinner Project. Any feedback on your experiences with the Community Dinner Series is greatly appreciated. Thank you!

1) Throughout your participation in the Community Dinner Series, how often did members of your family have dinner together?

- _____ Never
- _____ Rarely/only on holidays or special occasions
- _____ 1-2 times per month
- _____ 1-2 times per week
- _____ 3-4 times per week
- _____ 5 times per week or more

2) What kinds of advice or tips did you learn about how to have dinners together more regularly?

3) Throughout your participation in the Community Dinner Series, please rate your family dinners on the following scale.

Use the scale for EACH item (every item will have a number):

- 1= Never**
- 2= Rarely**
- 3= Sometimes**
- 4= Often**
- 5= Almost Always**

- _____ Plan meals in advance
- _____ Have fun preparing food together
- _____ Eat nutritious meals
- _____ Try new foods

- _____ Create a fun, inviting atmosphere
- _____ Reduce distractions (cell phones, television, etc.)
- _____ Tell funny stories and laugh together
- _____ Learn about each other's day
- _____ Make sure everyone has a voice at the table
- _____ Talk about things that matter
- _____ Talk about the kind of people we want to be
- _____ Discuss the news and how issues relate to our lives
- _____ Enjoy each other's company

4) Circle the items for which you received the MOST information, help, and advice during your participation in the Community Dinner Series.

- Plan meals in advance
- Have fun preparing food together
- Eat nutritious meals
- Try new foods
- Create a fun, inviting atmosphere
- Reduce distractions (cell phones, television, etc.)
- Tell funny stories and laugh together
- Learn about each other's day
- Make sure everyone has a voice at the table
- Talk about things that matter
- Talk about the kind of people we want to be
- Discuss the news and how issues relate to our lives
- Enjoy each other's company

5) Are there any items for which you need more information, help, or advice? If so, please circle these items.

- Plan meals in advance
- Have fun preparing food together
- Eat nutritious meals
- Try new foods
- Create a fun, inviting atmosphere
- Reduce distractions (cell phones, television, etc.)
- Tell funny stories and laugh together
- Learn about each other's day
- Make sure everyone has a voice at the table
- Talk about things that matter
- Talk about the kind of people we want to be
- Discuss the news and how issues relate to our lives
- Enjoy each other's company

6) How effective was this Community Dinner Series program as a whole? PLEASE CHECK ONLY ONE STATEMENT.

- ☐ The program was *excellent*.
- ☐ The program was *very good*.
- ☐ The program was *good*.
- ☐ The program was *fair*.
- ☐ The program was *poor*.

7) Please describe any experiences in this program that stand out for you, either positively or negatively.

8) As a result of your involvement in this program, do you think your family's dinner habits will improve?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9) Would you recommend the Community Dinner Series Program to a friend or neighbor?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Why or why not?

10) Please suggest ways to improve the Community Dinner Series Program.

Frequently Asked Questions

by Anne Fishel, Ph.D.

Why should we eat dinner together more often?

Most American families are starved for time to spend together, and dinner may be the only time of the day when we can reconnect, leaving behind our individual pursuits like playing video games, emailing and doing homework. Dinner is a time to relax, recharge, laugh, tell stories and catch up on the day's ups and downs, while developing a sense of who we are as a family.

Over the past 15 years researchers have confirmed what parents have known for a long time: sharing a family meal is good for the spirit, the brain and the health of all family members. Recent studies link regular family dinners with many behaviors that parents pray for: lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy and depression, as well as higher grade-point averages and self-esteem. Studies also indicate that dinner conversation is a more potent vocabulary-booster than reading, and the stories told around the kitchen table help our children build resilience. The icing on the cake is that regular family meals also lower the rates of obesity and eating disorders in children and adolescents. What else can families do that takes only about an hour a day and packs such a punch?

How many nights a week should we try to eat dinner together?

Researchers find that families who eat dinner together five nights a week reap great benefits, but there is no magic number, nor is dinner inherently preferable to other meals. If your family finds breakfast or weekend lunches easier meals for a gathering, then these could also "count."

We're just so busy. How can we find the time to cook and eat together?

Time is certainly one of the biggest obstacles to families gathering for dinner. One good strategy is to cook a big batch of soup or a double batch of a casserole over the weekend, and then freeze some to make weekday dinners easier. Some meals can be thrown together quickly with help from store-bought ingredients, like pre-cut veggies, or a pre-made pizza dough. There are also many recipes that take less than 15 minutes. Please see the [Food](#) section of our website for ideas (thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/).

If you think of family dinner as a time to nourish your family, prevent all kinds of problems, increase your children's cognitive abilities and provide pleasure and fun that they can build on for the rest of their lives, a nightly meal is an efficient use of time.

As long as we sit together and eat, does it really matter *what* we're eating?

I think it's hard to argue with the idea that feeding your family nutritious food is a good idea! This not only makes your children healthier as they grow right now, but it encourages healthy eating once they are living on their own. Some families enjoy experimenting with different menus, others like keeping a routine so that Monday night is for pasta, Tuesday for tortillas and so on. Some children like to share in the menu planning and the cooking, so the food becomes a central part of the family's identity. For other families, the food is really secondary to other aspects of the meal, like the conversation.

Is it wrong to eat dinner in front of the television?

Making a steady diet of eating family dinners in front of the TV would certainly interfere with the pleasures and benefits of conversation. Researchers have found that meals eaten in front of the TV do not carry the same mental health benefits as those eaten "unplugged." Certainly, it would be fine occasionally to watch a special program while eating a family meal. In addition, talking about a program as a family could provide benefits as well.

How much help should I reasonably expect from my family in preparing dinner? In cleaning up? Do I have to do this all myself?

Most children like to help and should be encouraged to do so. The trick is figuring out which tasks are developmentally right for your child. Even young children can be asked to sprinkle a seasoning, stir a stew or rinse vegetables. Elementary-aged kids can set and clear the table, pour the drinks and be involved in some food preparation. Many adolescents view cooking as an avenue of self-expression and may relish the idea of making a meal or a portion of a meal.

Sharing in all the tasks of dinner — grocery shopping, menu planning, cooking, serving and cleaning up — only makes this more of a family event. If someone is feeling overburdened, the roles and tasks should be reexamined and distributed more equitably. Everyone's dinner will be enhanced by more members contributing and by no single member feeling resentful.

Whenever we all get together, we argue. How can I prevent this atmosphere from taking over the dinner table?

Some families argue about particular topics, like messy rooms or a recent science grade. Agreeing to avoid those topics during dinner will decrease fighting during mealtime. Other families just seem to argue as a way of communicating with one another. In such a case, you may want to set certain ground rules: for example, each member has to wait to talk until he or she is holding a particular object, like a seashell, and anyone who raises his or her voice will agree to take a “time out” and calm down before returning to the table. Adults will need to set a good example by trying not to interrupt, and by asking questions rather than arguing with something said.

It's very important to us that our children grow up with good table manners. How can we teach good manners and not make the atmosphere at dinner uncomfortable?

If you focus on one priority at a time, you won't let the teaching of good manners dominate the atmosphere. Focusing on those manners that help build respectful speaking and listening, like not speaking with your mouth full or not talking over anyone, seems like a good place to start. Those manners are ones that parents can also try to improve themselves, which will make kids feel less scrutinized.

My children and/or my spouse are texting at the table, and it drives me crazy. How can I ask them to stop without driving them away?

You could ask them to try a no-texting experiment for a week or two to see if the conversation and atmosphere at the table is different for them as well as for you. Or, you could ask that they only use their phones to facilitate conversation, for example, looking up a movie time, defining a word or settling a dispute, like who won the World Series in 1985.

My children are too young to sit still for long meals. How can I get them to stay put?

It's important to keep your expectations realistic. Toddlers shouldn't be expected to sit for more than 10 or 15 minutes, and some may be done in five minutes. Better to have a happy, short dinner that you can build on as your child matures, than to make dinner a time with a lot of rules and fights. Here are some strategies that have been helpful to families with young kids:

- Make clear that “meal sitting” is different from “school sitting.” So, for example, everyone might wear PJs, or you might play music during the meal.
- Give your kids ice pops made with fresh juice after they’ve eaten their meals: It will take young kids about five minutes to finish one pop.
- Invite your child to stir a pot, crumble the cheese, set the timer or choose a menu from two choices offered. Having a hand in making the meal creates pride of ownership, and that may make them stay at the table longer.
- Avoid having a revolving door at the dinner table. If your child wants to leave the table, allow this only once or twice. After two departures, the child should know that dinnertime is over. This is different from forcing a child to sit, but takes away any positive reinforcement derived from leaving the table.
- Present each part of the meal as a course, for example, peas as an appetizer, pasta with pesto sauce as the main course and orange slices for dessert. Maybe your child can help clear and bring on each course so that you are harnessing a child’s activity in the service of the meal. For example, “While you’re up, would you get the water pitcher?”

How do I keep my teenagers interested in family dinners, when there are so many activities pulling them away?

You may be surprised to learn that when teenagers are asked about the importance of family dinners, they rate them very high on their list of priorities. So, you should assume that your kids want to have dinner with you. If they don’t, start by asking what would make dinnertime more pleasant for them.

Here are some strategies that have been helpful to other parents with teenagers:

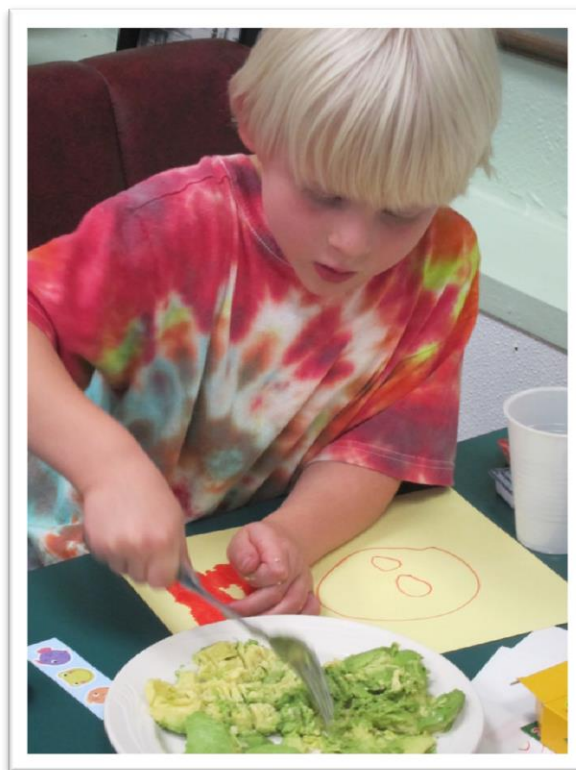
- Agree that dinner will be off limits for discussing conflicts — no talk about homework, whose turn it is to take out the trash, a recent D on a math quiz, or how late the curfew should be on Friday night.
- Offer to make a new meal based on your teen’s interests — if he is studying South African history or Indian literature, check out epicurious.com and search for recipes by country.
- Invite your kid to make a course or part of the meal, particularly something fairly quick (but special and dramatic) that will elicit oohs and ahs from the rest of the family. Popovers, banana flambé, and fruit smoothies all do the trick.
- Speak about your own experiences of the day in a way that is honest and self-disclosing, perhaps revealing something that was embarrassing or challenging. Or repeat a joke that you heard at work.

- Create a weekly dinner ritual when your kids' friends are invited to dinner or to dessert. For example, on a tired Sunday night, friends could be invited to come over and make sundaes.
- Ask your teen to choose music for you to listen to during dinner. This will also give you something to talk about that is likely of great interest to your child. On some nights, you might play your own music.

My child is a picky eater. What should I do to encourage her to try different foods?

The best strategy to prevent picky eating is for parents to model their own enjoyment of foods they are offering their kids at the dinner table. Serving food “family style” in bowls or platters placed on the table allows children to see the adults enjoying a food that the kids can just reach out and try.

The worst strategy is for parents to pressure their kids to eat or to restrict foods. If you want your child to try new foods, you shouldn't tell them they can't have dessert unless they eat all their vegetables. Another common mistake is for parents to give up too easily if a child refuses a new food. Researchers have found that children may need 8 to 15 offerings of new foods before they decide they like the food. No wonder so many children are deemed “picky eaters” when so many parents give up trying to interest a child in a novel food after one or two attempts.



Resources



All the information in this toolkit about the benefits of family dinners can be found in the resources below. Take a look for yourself!

- Aronsson, K. & Gottzen, L. (2011). Generational positions at a family dinner: Food morality and social order. *Language in Society*, 40, 1-22.
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- Eisenberg, M.E., Olson, R.E., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., & Bearinger, L.H. (2004). Correlations between family meals and psychosocial well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 158(8), 792-796.
- Fulkerson, J.A., Story, M., Mellin, A., Leffert, N., Neumark-Sztainer, D., French, S. A. (2006). Family dinner meal frequency and adolescent development: Relationships with developmental assets and high-risk behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 39(3), 337-345.
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