

KEEPING THE FUN IN FAMILY DINNER



Food

No matter what you're making this month, try getting the kids involved!



Fun

Bring some humor to the table with a family joke jar!



Conversation

Our conversation starters for September are all about fun!



At this time of year, everyone is in a rush. Often September means the return of routines, but also the beginning of extra curricular activities, evening meetings and other dinner-disrupting obligations that can make gathering for a calm and upbeat family meal a real challenge. As our Executive Director Lynn Barendsen commented in a recent NPR interview, some parents find that “they finally get everyone to the table, and they’re already looking at their watches thinking about clean-up.”



In other words, fun isn’t necessarily on the family dinner agenda when our schedules are jam-packed, but it’s the one ingredient that’s guaranteed to make your shared meals a success. When mealtimes are enjoyable and relaxing for the whole family, it’s easier to connect in a meaningful way and to help family members build healthy lifelong habits. A stressful atmosphere turns everyone off to the table, so go ahead and have a little fun!

1 Find the Middle Ground.

If dinnertime stresses you out, read our article on finding and embracing a routine that works for you.

2 Accept the Imperfections.

As team member Amy discovered, even the most imperfect family dinner moments can be deeply memorable if you’re able to embrace them.

3 Forget the Cooking.

If you hate to cook, you can still love family dinner with these tips from Dr. Anne Fishel that keep the focus off the food and on the family.

4 Aim for Balance.

As FDP friend and meal planning expert Aviva Goldfarb writes, sometimes you may want to consider foregoing the fun of extracurriculars to make room for the fun at your family dinner table.

5 Play With Your Food.

It’s okay to let the table manners slide every once in a while, as a group of grandparents discovered when they joined their grandchildren in food-based play!



Tips for Including Kids in Cooking

Allison Cappelaere, MSPH, RD, from the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, offers these suggestions:

- Before stepping foot in the kitchen, **get your hands dirty and grow food together!** Engaging children in gardening is an excellent way to connect them with the natural environment, help them develop an appreciation for where their food comes from, and increase their fruit and vegetable consumption (because most kids will, in fact, eat food that they had a hand in growing!).
- **Involve kids in meal planning.** Allow your child to participate in the process by suggesting a food that he or she would like to cook, or let them choose from several healthy menu ideas that you suggest. Try designing a fun-themed dinner and discuss ways to make it healthy with a variety of colors and textures.
- **Make it a total experience by shopping for ingredients together, too.** Bring a list of ingredients with you to the market and allow your child to help you find everything you need. Use this as an opportunity to show children how to read labels and choose the healthiest options. You can even let kids pick a new fruit or vegetable to try as a family adventure!



Maggie LaBarbera, founder of kid's nutrition site Nourish Interactive, serves up three pointers to make meal time inviting:

- **Start each week with a family dinner night!** When the whole family pitches in during mealtime, kids are more likely to eat the finished product. Use this cooking time to teach your child about nutrition and serving sizes.
- **Gather round the table.** On family dinner night, eat around a table and let family be the focus by turning off the TV, cell phones and iPods. Use dinners as an opportunity to check in, catch up and share thoughts with each other.
- **Don't give up!** Studies have shown that many kids won't try a new food until it's been offered several times, so keep trying. Don't become upset if your child rejects a new food; after a few attempts it may seem more familiar. Encourage your child to try at least two bites of anything new, and be sure to applaud adventurous eating.





 **FUN**

Keep a Family Joke Jar handy for nights when the dinner table could use some humor! Let each member of the family write favorite jokes on slips of paper and put them into an empty mason jar, jelly jar or can. When you think a good joke or two might lift everyone's spirits, bring the jar to the table and take turns drawing slips and telling the jokes.

Need Help Getting Started? Here are some favorite jokes from kids we know:

Why did the chicken cross the plate? To become the winner, winner, chicken dinner!
Why didn't the skeleton cross the road? Because he didn't have the guts!
What's a cow's favorite movie? The Sound of Moo-sic!



My Joke : _____

My Joke : _____

My Joke : _____

My Joke : _____





CONVERSATION

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AGES 3-7



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Name three things that are fun for you.

What's your favorite silly face to make? What about a silly sound?

If you joined the circus, what would your circus act be?
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AGES 8-13

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Make up three silly new traditions for our family. What would they be?

If people count sheep to get to sleep, what do sheep count?

What's the funniest or strangest thing that happened to you today?
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AGES 14-100

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If you could create a school dedicated to fun, what would it be like? What classes would be taught there?

What is your most unusual talent? Demonstrate it!

