

LOVE YOUR TIME AT THE TABLE



Food

Valentine's Day isn't the only celebration on the calendar this month.



Fun

As long as we're talking about feelings, why not let your inner performer shine through with an acting game that's all about emotions?



Conversation

This month, focus on improving connection with your spouse or partner.



Valentine's Day is coming soon, and with it, the annual demands that we lavish love on our family and friends in numerous ways. School-aged kids will pass out Valentine's cards and trinkets; couples will scramble for the perfect dinner reservations. For 24 hours, everyone will be focused on love -- and then what?

We're no Valentine grouches -- we love a good excuse to show that we care! But all that pressure on one day

LOVE THE JOURNEY.

Sure, you think, as you wipe applesauce off the wall, try to corral a wandering toddler, placate a picky eater or deal with a tenacious teen who acts like they'd rather be anywhere in the world than at your dinner table. But even as you encounter various challenges with family dinners that will grow and change as surely as the people sitting around the table, remember that it's always a work in progress with perfectly imperfect results. If you need a little "been-there-done-that" bucking up, check out one of these articles from seasoned family dinner champions at different stages of the journey:

- Guest blogger Casey Hinds shares her story of learning to love family dinner despite its imperfections
- Former team member Amy talks about the perfect act of love that came from a wildly imperfect family dinner
- Dr. Anne Fishel reminds us of all the ways we can love our family dinners, even if we hate one of dinnertime's most basic requirements: Cooking

LOVE MAKING IT SPECIAL (EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE)!

Okay, you might not need flowers, candy or a fancy occasion to show that you love someone, but Valentine's Day does provide a good excuse to shake things up and make your family dinner extra-special! Going outside the box -- without getting too complicated or adding too much stress to your plate -- can also be a way to fall back in love with dinner itself, especially if you're starting to feel like your dinnertime routine is stuck in a rut.

- If you'd like to focus on romance with just you and your partner, try creating an At-Home Restaurant.
- To make dinner extra-special with older kids and teens, why not try a round of Iron Chef for the whole family?
- With younger kids, have them help you design a special dinner around a specific color or flavor (why not red for Valentine's Day?).

of the year can obscure the simple truth that love is something we can show through our actions every single day. It doesn't take cards, flowers, hearts or candy; much like family dinner itself, real love is often just about showing up and being present. So this month, we're offering some inspiration to help you bring the love to your dinner table every day.

LOVE BUILDING INDEPENDENCE.

One often-overlooked benefit of a family dinner routine is that it's a perfect opportunity to help kids of all ages build necessary life skills that will help them to become healthy, independent adults. While it can be hard to love letting kids help in the kitchen when they leave a totally unlovable mess behind, the truth is that sharing responsibilities for dinner prep and clean-up not only makes kids more competent in the long run, but can also improve your bond.

Makayla Hendricks, a teen representative of FCCLA, says "I notice a huge difference in my relationship with my mom when we focus on eating dinner together. It can be hard, but I promise if you put forth the effort and help prepare and clean up your meals that your relationships with your family members will strengthen."

Speaking of FCCLA, our partners there are gearing up for a special week of recognition this month. Join us in celebrating FCCLA Week February 7-13, 2016! To learn more, check out <http://fcclainc.org/news--media/fccla-week.php>.

WE'RE SPREADING THE FAMILY DINNER LOVE THIS MONTH.

The Family Dinner Project is hitting the road hard in February! On our plate: Community Dinner events with three fantastic partner organizations. We'll be loving dinnertime at Sanctuary for Families in New York City, The Boys and Girls Club of Newark, NJ and with Blue Star Families at Joint Base Lewis McChord in DuPont, Washington.

Find out more about hosting a TFDP Community Dinner.



ORIGAMI DUMPLINGS



This is a great dish for everyone to make together. Ideally, make the filling ahead, so it has time to cool off. Each family member can customize their own dumplings by including his or her favorite ingredients. Just make sure you keep track of your dumplings, because once you close them up it can be hard to tell which is which!

This recipe comes to us from the Swick-Troekel Family.



Instructions:

1. Cut the drained tofu into small cubes and toss with Asian five-spice.
2. Put oil into a wok or pan (enough to fully coat with a thick layer) and heat. Then fry the tofu, stirring often so it doesn't stick. It may crumble some, but it doesn't matter! Once it has browned slightly, remove it.
3. Add a little more oil and heat again. Fry the garlic and ginger until the garlic is browned. Then add the vegetables, starting with the crunchiest (which take longer to cook). As it starts to look tender, add the next vegetable. Toss and sample often to know when it is tender enough to eat easily.
4. Turn off the heat and add the tofu back to the filling and mix.
5. Everyone gets a stack of dumpling wrappers and a spoon. Also put out a plate, a dish of water and a bowl of filling. Dumpling building time! Spoon a small amount into the center. Use your finger to place water where you will fold the dumpling, like glue. Try any shape you can imagine! (Parents tend to make a lot of simple triangles, which are most stable and hold the most filling, while the kids make purses, hats, jungle animals, etc).
6. You may steam, fry or boil the dumplings. To fry them, you must have 1-2 inches of oil in your pan at a very high heat. This is messy, but the preferred taste for many (crispy, if done right). Boiling tends to make them very soft and doughy, and can result in many exploded dumplings. Steaming gives a firm and chewy dumpling. Spray cooking oil on a steamer is very important, otherwise they stick and rip! Place a vegetable steamer in a large pot (big enough for the steamer, deep enough to be taller than the steamer and dumplings, and with a lid.) Place dumplings on the steamer and boil water below the level of the dumplings. Leave a lid on the pot. Pour a little water over the dumplings once or twice during the next 5 minutes. The dumpling skins should contract and look shiny when they're finished.
7. Remove carefully and eat with dipping sauce or soy sauce. See if you can figure out whose dumpling you are eating!

Ingredients

Serves 4-6

- 1 package firm tofu, drained
- 1-1 1/2 cups each of finely chopped vegetables: we use green cabbage, carrots, mushrooms, zucchini and broccoli. Use whatever is fresh and try new flavors!
- 1-2 cloves of garlic-minced
- 1 Tbsp. of minced fresh ginger
- 1 Tbsp. Asian five-spice powder
- 2-3 Tbsp. peanut or canola oil
- 1 package store-bought dumpling wrappers (for smaller fingers, use egg roll wrappers, which are larger)
- Store-bought dumpling dipping sauce or soy sauce



GUESS THAT EMOTION

This is a good game to help children learn to identify feelings. Have one person leave the table for a minute. Once she leaves, the rest of the family decides on an emotion (or you can pick out of a hat).

Some examples include:

- Happy
- Angry
- Sad
- Mad

- Excited
- Nervous

When the missing family member returns to the table, the rest of the family eats and acts with that feeling in mind. For example, if the emotion is “worry,” someone might say “I have so much homework tonight I’m never going to get to sleep.” Or you can make it a bit more challenging for older kids by allowing only body language and facial expression to convey emotion, or even just facial expression alone.

See more fun ideas at thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun

CONVERSATION

Remember the 1990’s sitcom Seinfeld? There’s a memorable episode where the character Kramer mocks couples’ conversations. “How was your day?” he simps. “Was it a good day or a bad day? What kind of a day was it?”

It’s a laughable moment, but one that can hit a bit too close to home; after all, the first question that comes to mind when you see your partner in the evening is the mundane “How was your day?” The problem with that

question as a conversation opener is that it begs for a one-word answer. “Fine,” comes to mind. “Awful” is another alternative. “Great!” probably doesn’t come up too much, but hopefully it’s on the list of possible answers. And then what? Drawing out more information to deepen the conversation can be more challenging than it seems.

A better approach might be to ask more open-ended questions, like the ones that follow:

- “What was the most interesting thing you did today?”
- “I know you’ve been working on _____. what’s the next step?”
- “Did you get to solve any problems/make anything cool/help anybody today?”
- “Is your work still challenging/rewarding to you?”
- “If you could change one thing about your day, what would it be?”
- “I thought of you today when....”
- “Have you learned anything new lately?”
- “How are you feeling about....?”
- “What were the best and worst parts of your day?”
- “What’s something you wish we could do together?”

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