

SHOWING FAMILY DINNER SOME LOVE



Food

weeten family dinner for your sweeties with homemade hot fudge. Try using it as a dip for strawberries for a Valentine's dessert!



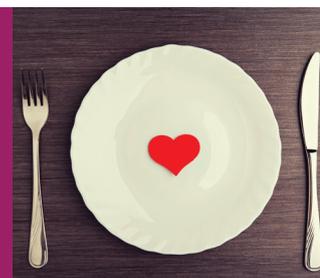
Fun

Make every night a "loving" occasion with this list game!



Conversation

Model healthy relationships at your dinner table! Check out these tips for modeling romance at the dinner table, from The Family Dinner Project team and our friend Dr. Richard Weissbourd.





Once the excitement of big family gatherings and New Year's resolutions wears off, it's all too easy to fall back into the same old traps of modern life -- the ones that make many of us feel too busy, too tired and too stressed to prioritize family dinners. We know from our work with families that most people believe that family dinner is important, but can't always figure out how to turn their positive thoughts about dinnertime into actions.

With Valentine's Day approaching, you're probably thinking of ways to show a little extra love to the important people in your life. So how about showing a little extra love to the THINGS that are important, too? By increasing your commitment to family dinners this February, you'll also be giving your family a loving gift that will last long after the 14th

COMMIT TO PLANNING.

For some families, planning meals ahead of time is one of the most difficult obstacles to having regular dinners together. De-stress the planning process with one of our Meal Planning Hacks!

thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/meal-planning-hacks-busy-families

COMMIT TO COOKING TOGETHER.

Get everybody into the kitchen to help prepare meals isn't just a way to lighten the workload; it's also a great way to bond! Try one of these activities to get kids interested in helping out.

thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/explore-mystery-foods
thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/blindfolded-smell-test-2
thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/make-it-literary/

COMMIT TO CARING...AT THE TABLE.

These special dinner-friendly activities will put a little heart into your mealtime, on Valentine's Day or any day!

thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/song-game
thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/dinner-games/ages-14-100-dinner-games/origami-love-notes
thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/cards-to-show-you-care

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE TOWNSEND FAMILY

This month, our featured family story is told through the perspective of an inspiring teen! Gabriela Rodriguez-Townsend was introduced to The Family Dinner Project through our work with FCCLA. We're pleased to feature Gabriela and her family in the month of February, with a special nod to Gabriela's own personal service project, which uses family dinners as a platform to help other teens learn about healthy relationships.

THE FAMILY:

Gabriela Rodriguez-Townsend, 15; her parents; and siblings Anthony (19), Daniel (8) and Isabella (5). The Townsends live in Pflugerville, Texas.

THE GOAL:

Gabriela says that the family's shared goal is to eat together and enjoy one another's company more often. Her philosophy is that family dinner should be "a priority, not a privilege."

She's taking that a step further by working on a month-long service project at her high school, Project Love. Through workshops, hands-on



projects and community involvement, Gabriela is teaching her classmates about ways to cultivate healthy relationships “whether it’s a friend, sibling, parents, teacher, lover or a random person they meet.”

THE CHALLENGES:

Within her own family, Gabriela says the biggest challenge is a familiar one for most busy families: just getting everyone together at the table! However, she has also recognized something happening among her peers that she hopes to tackle through her Project Love efforts. Citing an obsession with pop culture and general negative sentiment among her fellow teens as they grapple with world events and social media, Gabriela says: “The main thing that inspired me was the lack of qualitative relationships in my home, friendships and community. Week Four of Project Love has a theme of Family Connections, and I decided that since family is foundation, why not start together at the table?”

THE STRATEGIES:

To help her own family spend more time together

at the table, Gabriela asks everyone in advance to help with dinner ideas, so there’s no last-minute rush to figure out what to cook. She also says “My family dinners tend to be super short, so we try to use TFDP conversation starters to keep everyone wrangled in for a bit longer!”

As part of Project Love, Gabriela is teaching workshops to students at her school to help them bring a family dinner experience to their own homes. She’s teaching other teens how to plan and prepare a simple meal, and providing conversation starters and additional recipes as a gift they can bring home to their families.

THE FOOD:

The one meal that brings the whole Townsend family to the table in a hurry is their mom’s special chili recipe!

THE TAKEAWAY:

Gabriela says that she hopes that through Project Love, her classmates will learn from her that “to get respect, you have to give respect.” She’s inspired to pass that message along by her belief in the importance of family and her learnings from The Family Dinner Project.

“Family is most definitely the foundation of any child’s life. The Family Dinner Project showed me that to be successful in life, a bond with your family is important.”

THE BEST PART:

For Gabriela, the best part of family dinners is being able to share her accomplishments with her family and receive their praise and support. She says her younger siblings enjoy the attention they get at the table for telling jokes, and her parents have developed an appreciation for the way family dinners keep her eldest brother close to home.

We congratulate Gabriela on her outstanding efforts in her school and community, and are proud to feature her and Project Love!



HOMEMADE HOT FUDGE



Sometimes you just need a good old-fashioned satisfying dessert, and our Executive Director, Lynn Barendsen, has got a great one: Her mom's hot fudge recipe. Lynn suggests pairing the hot fudge with vanilla ice cream and a brownie, as pictured, for a simple but special treat. You can use your best brownie recipe or follow Lynn's recommendation and try Katharine Hepburn's brownies – they're an FDP favorite!



Instructions:

1. Combine the corn syrup, light cream, sugar, and water in a saucepan over medium heat. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly.
2. Remove from the heat and add the chocolate chips, stirring until smooth.
3. Add the vanilla and mix thoroughly. Serve hot.

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup light corn syrup
- 1/2 cup light cream
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon water
- 1 cup semi sweet chocolate chips
- 1 tsp. vanilla



20 THINGS I LOVE ABOUT...

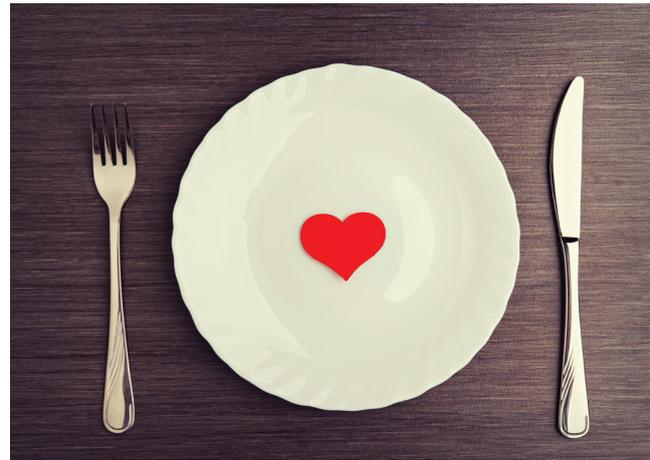


Come up with a topic together – or put some ideas in a jar and pull out one randomly. Examples include a season or a person or place, or anything really! Then go around the table and have everyone name something silly or serious they love about that season or person or place until you have twenty items. Make sure to write everything down so you can have fun looking at it a month, a year, or 20 years from now!



REVEALING ROMANCE AT THE DINNER TABLE

Just last week — don't ask why — I had the perfect opportunity to ask my 6-year-old son Patrick about romance. If you've never asked a first-grader to tell you what he or she looks for in a partner, I highly recommend trying it at least once. Not only is it entertaining, it can also be fairly enlightening; after all, if I hadn't asked, I wouldn't have known that Patrick likes a girl with a "cute ponytail" or that he thinks it's important for partners to express appreciation for each other. But talking about love and relationships with my kid while waiting in line at the coffee shop made me think about the big picture: How do children of all ages form their opinions and attitudes about love? And how do we, as the adults in their lives, influence those attitudes?



Richard Weissbourd, psychologist, author and co-director of the Making Caring Common Project (and a longtime friend of The Family Dinner Project), broke it down for me. "It's important to model and be mindful of what you're modeling. It doesn't mean you never

fight. In fact, it can be helpful to model how you work things out,” he told me, when I asked him about the importance of modeling relationships for kids. However, he was also quick to point out that modeling isn’t the only way to influence the attitudes our children have about romance. In many households, single parenthood or other factors may make it difficult to “lead by example” on a daily basis. “Lots of kids are growing up without models of good relationships, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t pass wisdom along to your kids about love,” Weissbourd assured me. “Lots of parents feel that because they have failed in their own relationships that they don’t have wisdom to share, but I think that’s wrong. Talk to kids about your learnings.”

It sounds like good advice, but I assumed that not every kid is going to be as eager to talk about romance as my six-year-old. Weissbourd agreed that they may not always make themselves available for conversation, but “Kids have questions — they want to talk to adults about how to distinguish between infatuation and real love. They’re interested in the idealism about love and about how to handle breakups or how to maintain a relationship. They’re trying to figure out how to start a relationship. I also think that teenagers are often very interested in ethical dilemmas in relationships. Is it okay for a senior to date a freshman? If a friend of mine is cheating, do I have a responsibility to tell? Minimally, you have to talk to your kids about respect and self-respect in relationships, whether they want to or not. It’s as important as the sex talk.”

With that encouragement in mind, I reached out to other members of The Family Dinner Project Team to find out how they handle modeling — and talking about — love and romance, especially around their dinner tables. Here are some of their tips:

MAKE ROMANCE VISIBLE.

“Leave each other notes and/or small gifts. Let your kids see them (making sure, of course, that they’re kid-appropriate!).” — Lynn Barendsen, The Family Dinner Project Executive Director

“Be physically affectionate — a kiss hello in the kitchen, a hug at the stove, a shoulder rub, is a way of staying connected to your partner, and letting your kids feel some of the warmth between the two of you.” — Dr. Anne Fishel, author of *Home for Dinner* and co-founder of The Family Dinner Project

“Making each other laugh is a huge part of our relationship, and it’s important to us that our son see us joking around with each other and being goofy, and including him in that part of how we interact — at the table especially, but really any time.” — Charlotte Svirsky, TFDP team member

MODEL CARING AND CONSIDERATION.

“Lighten your partner’s burden by doing something over and beyond what is expected: ‘After the day you’ve had, let me do the dishes even though I made dinner tonight.’” — Anne

“I have teenage sisters, and they’ve spent quite a bit of time around me and Dan since we started dating — one of the things they’ve observed is how we organize our weeks as a family, and specifically, make sure that everyone feels supported. So if Dan has finals, I’ll make sure he gets extra time in the mornings and evenings; when I need to travel, or have a big project due, he’ll do the same for me.” — Charlotte

LET THE SEAMS SHOW.

“Don’t hide the disagreements. Healthy relation-

ships can, and sometimes should, involve disagreement. So if you argue, you can offer examples about how to do so thoughtfully. And then of course there's the fun of making up!" — Lynn

"It can be helpful to model how you work things out. You don't let things fester, you work things out in a way that's relatively immediate and mature, thoughtful and appreciative of other points of view. You take other perspectives." — Rick

MODEL THE SMALL GESTURES.

"Show appreciation: Thank your partner for her creative plan for dinner, for his going out to the grocery store to get that one missing ingredient, for her cooking while keeping an eye on the kids, and so on." — Anne

"Every once in a while, Dan will take our son to get me coffee while I stay in bed. I think that models the simplicity of romance and how much little gestures matter in how you treat each other (not the big sweeping romantic gestures of movies, but little everyday things)." — Charlotte

TALK ABOUT IT.

"Express love verbally — parents often tell their kids they love them, but why not say it to your partner in front of your kids?" — Anne

"Share stories about how you met, why you fell in love, what you love about each other." — Lynn

"I think it's a good idea to talk about TVs and films that you both watch — I used to watch Grey's Anatomy with my daughter, which was a great way to talk about relationships. That's not a hard thing to do. Sometimes immature and damaging ideas about relationships are included in media — sexism, misogyny, homophobia. As a parent you can't let that stuff go by, you have to say something to your kids and say what you find troubling about it. It's not just being reactive, it's being proactive and letting kids hear what you think about healthy relationships." — Rick

READY TO GIVE IT A TRY?

Start by asking these questions at your dinner table tonight:

- What do you think are the ideal characteristics for a life partner or spouse?
- How does someone act when they are "in love?"
- What do you think is the difference between love and romance?
- Do you believe in love at first sight?
- Can you think of some examples from books, TV or movies of healthy and unhealthy relationships?
- For more tips on nurturing your relationship with a spouse or partner at the dinner table, visit our Family Starts with Two section!

thefamilydinnerproject.org/family-starts-two

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