

CHOOSING AND USING WORDS AT THE DINNER TABLE



Food

Welcome Spring and celebrate Earth Day with this veggie-packed pasta dish!



Fun

Enjoy some more wordplay -- and give a nod to National Poetry Month -- with this rhyming game!



Conversation

Choose your words carefully -- you can only pick three!





Our co-founder, Dr. Anne Fishel, is fond of saying that while food brings everyone to the table, it's what happens at the table that keeps them there (and makes them want to come back!). That's why The Family Dinner Project has always focused on putting fun and conversation on the menu at family dinner. A positive, enjoyable eating experience has benefits for the whole family, and makes it more likely that you'll create an ongoing dinnertime routine.

Words -- what we choose to say, how we say it and even how we play with words and language -- create the kind of pleasant and welcoming environment that makes family dinner worthwhile. Here are some of our top tips for choosing and using words for fun and conversation that will make everyone want seconds:

PLAY WITH YOUR WORDS

Regular family dinners give kids an edge when it comes to building vocabulary and early reading skills. You can enhance those benefits at any age by playing word games during dinnertime! Try a few of these favorites at your next shared meal.

thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/food-poetry

thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/fictionary

thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/story-by-sentence

HELP EVERYONE FIND MORE WORDS

It's a common theme among families of all sizes: They get to the dinner table, and then the conversation dies with the dreaded one-word answer. "How was your day?" "Fine." "What did you do?" "Nothing."

thefamilydinnerproject.org/food-for-thought/how-to-avoid-one-word-answers

thefamilydinnerproject.org/family-starts-with-two/initiating-deeper-conversations

FIND THE RIGHT WORDS

While the dinner table is more fun when topics of conversation stay upbeat and positive, sometimes it's only natural that the discussion might take a more serious tone. When a family member is sad or disappointed, or something distressing has happened close to home or even in the news, it's important to support one another. Check out these articles about dealing with the more serious stuff at the table.

thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/talking-kids-tragedy

thefamilydinnerproject.org/food-for-thought/caring-conversation-how-to-bring-empathy-to-the-table

thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation/challenging-conversations

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE GONZALEZ FAMILY

Hailey Gonzalez reached out to us to let us know how much she appreciates reading the “Real Family Dinner Projects” series on our site and learning about other families’ dinner routines. We invited her to share her own story, and are so glad she did! Meet the Gonzalez Family.

THE FAMILY:

Hailey and Jeremiah Gonzalez of Walla Walla Washington, and kids Rachael (15), Riley (13), Jaden (11), Jayelle (9), and Milo (1). There’s also a new baby Gonzalez on the way!

THE GOAL:

Currently, Hailey is working on teaching her kids to cook and take a more active role in the family dinner process. With a family of seven (and still growing), it’s important to the Gonzalez family to make sure that the burdens of daily dinnertime don’t fall on just one person.

“After dinner every child has a job and they get the kitchen cleaned up in about 10 minutes. It gives this mama a much needed break from cleaning, and the kids get to learn the importance of helping out and working together,” Hailey says.

As to teaching them all to cook, “It takes a lot of time and patience, but the end reward of a yummy dinner you didn’t have to cook is so worth it!”

THE CHALLENGES:

Like so many other families with school-aged kids, the Gonzalez family finds that the biggest struggle in having family dinners is just finding the time to gather everyone in between activities. With so many people in the household, “dinner is an important time in our day where all 7 of us get to sit down together, one of the only times in a day that we do.”

THE STRATEGIES:

To help with the time crunch, Hailey recommends making sure to meal plan, taking the guesswork and stress out of deciding what to make for dinner each night and offering the chance to prep ahead

whenever possible. For successful family dinners for all involved, the Gonzalez family relies heavily on modeling. It starts in the kitchen, where both Hailey and Jeremiah make sure to prioritize cooking and showing their kids that the tasks involved in food preparation can be fun. At the table, they take pains to model healthy eating and enjoyment of a wide variety of foods, serving lots of fruits and vegetables and whole grains at every meal while saving treats for weekends and special occasions. But while Hailey says all the kids are healthy, adventurous eaters, she and Jeremiah remain realistic:

Every member of the household is allowed one “pass food,” which they’re never asked to eat. (9-year-old Jayelle passes on tomatoes.)

THE FOOD:

The Gonzalez family’s emphasis on healthy eating means that all members of the family enjoy a variety of vegetables, such as roasted brussels sprouts, green beans and kale. But a current family favorite for all seven is Spaghetti Squash Alfredo with chicken. Hailey says the slight crunch of the squash that she uses in place of the noodles makes a nice change that the kids really enjoy.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Hailey says she has enjoyed following The Family Dinner Project and seeing “how other families operate.” Learning about others’ habits has shown her that everyone has their own way of doing dinner, and there’s not one right answer that will work for all families!

THE BEST PART:

For busy parents Hailey and Jeremiah, knowing that they can end their day with a healthy, delicious meal — regardless of how the rest of the day unfolded — is a great stress-reliever. And since it’s the only time of day when they’re guaranteed to have uninterrupted moments with all of the kids, they enjoy having the opportunity to watch the children open up and share with them.

“This is the time when the kids will open up about the little details of their day that might have otherwise gone unsaid.”



PASTA PRIMAVERA



This veggie-packed pasta recipe comes to us from our friends at the Recipe for Success Foundation. You can customize it for your family's tastes by substituting any vegetables you prefer. Zucchini? Squash? Green beans? Tomatoes? Almost anything will work in this endlessly adaptable dish!



Instructions:

1. Collect and measure all of your ingredients to create a mise en place.
2. Heat a large sauté pan to medium high heat and add ½ the olive oil; let heat up for 1 – 2 minutes.
3. Add minced carrots to the pan and sauté for 2 minutes.
4. Add minced celery and continue cooking 2 minutes.
5. Stir in the minced onion and cook until it starts to seem clear (about 5 minutes.) Add salt.
6. Add the minced garlic and continue cooking for about 2 minutes, or until they release their wonderful aroma.
7. Stir in the minced parsley.
8. Gently add the green onion, bell pepper, asparagus, and broccoli and cook for 3-4 minutes until all the veggies turn even brighter.
9. Stir in the fresh or frozen peas and spinach and remove pan from heat.
10. Add the pasta and the rest of the olive oil, and toss to coat.
11. Divide into shallow soup bowls. Garnish with basil leaves, grated Parmesan cheese and a sprinkling of cracked pepper. Serve immediately.

Ingredients

- ½ package fettuccini-style dried noodles, cooked according to package directions
- ¼ cup olive oil, divided
- 2 carrots, minced
- 2 ribs celery, minced
- 1 small red onion, minced
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 5 stalks parsley minced
- 1 green onion, sliced thin
- 1 red bell pepper, julienne
- ½ bunch asparagus, tough stalks removed and tops cut into 1 inch pieces
- 1 cup broccoli flowers, steamed for 3-4 minutes until bright green
- ½ cup peas (fresh or frozen)
- 2 ounces fresh spinach leaves, torn into bite-sized pieces
- 4-6 basil leaves, chiffonade
- 1/8 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese



HIGGLETY PIGGLETY



thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/higglety-pigglety

One person thinks of a rhyming pair of words, like Funny Bunny. Then the person gives clues which 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.



CONVERSATION STARTER



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