

INDEPENDENCE AT THE DINNER TABLE



Food

Enjoy summer's bounty with Brenda Thompson's fast and fresh Bruschetta Chicken Skillet!



Fun

It's the perfect season for some outdoor family time. Relax during (or after) dinner with a game of "Use Your Senses."



Conversation

Tackle the topic of independence and dive into American history with these Recipes for Conversation!



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION Talk About: 4th of July



Use these conversation starters around your dinner table. Why do we celebrate the 4th of July?

Do you think you have too much freedom, or not enough? If you could be free to do anything you wanted would you do?

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "With freedom comes responsibility. What do you think that means?"

Do you know anyone, in real life or from history, who fought for freedom? What do you admire about that person?

Imagine you were helping to create a new, independent nation. What would you want to include in its constitution?

As July 4th approaches, Americans are getting ready to celebrate another year of independence. And as summer gets into full swing, families are also celebrating an independence of sorts -- freedom from school-year schedules and the constraints on time and energy that often make family dinners feel stressful or difficult to accomplish.

There's another way to celebrate independence that may not be as obvious: Building independence skills in family members through the act of gathering for dinner. From the youngest diners all the way through to the adults, everyone can benefit from taking ownership of the family meal in some way. Here are some ideas to help you make every day "Independence Day" at your table:

FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Toddlers and preschoolers are often eager to help, but let's be honest -- how many of us cringe inwardly at the idea of the mess and chaos that can come with little "helpers" in the kitchen? Still, finding a way for little ones to contribute is important for their development and will pay off in later years with older kids who are used to pitching in. Allow young children to fetch and carry items like napkins, spoons and non-breakable cups and dinnerware to the table; sprinkle pre-measured seasonings; stir; transfer whole ingredients like cherry tomatoes into serving bowls; and stand on a stool to wash produce in the sink.

For more tips on dining with toddlers, read *How to Make Your Toddler an Adventurous Eater and Cooperative Diner*:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/toddlers-cooperation

FOR GRADE-SCHOOL KIDS

As kids enter the elementary years, they'll be more capable of helping, within a wide spectrum of developmental skills. Tuning in to your own child's strengths at this stage will help as you suggest tasks they can do to help with family dinner. Emerging math skills can be used to count, sort and help with "doubling" recipes; better motor skills mean kids can pour, shake, carry heavier/more breakable objects. As fine motor coordination improves, kids can progress from tearing ingredients like basil leaves and lettuce, to using kitchen shears to "chop" items and finally to learning basic knife skills and kitchen safety.

Beyond building independence with skills, grade-school kids are likely to start wanting more of a

say in what the family eats and what goes on their plates. Let them plan one or two meals each week and practice making shopping lists of the necessary ingredients. Some late-elementary kids will even be ready to cook their chosen dishes with an adult at their side.

For more on grade-school children and dinner time, read *Adding Competence and Rules Into the Mix*: thefamilydinnerproject.org/school-aged-kids

FOR TEENS AND TWEENS

Research shows that by age 14, only about a third of kids will sit down to dinner with their families regularly -- but the majority of teens say they truly enjoy family dinner. While school and sports schedules can really impact the frequency of family meals for this age group, they also provide a good opportunity to invite the kids themselves to make some decisions about mealtimes.

Ask adolescents to help you decide on a family dinner schedule, suggest menus, and even weigh in on what the rules should be at the table (especially valuable with distractions like technology often appearing on the menu). By middle school, most kids can be trusted with larger cooking tasks and can use stoves and ovens safely as long as they're taught proper technique. Find ways for them to take the lead on family dinner, and perhaps consider building in a "friend night" each week when they can invite someone to share your meal -- making the table more welcoming and comfortable for the teens, and giving you another window into their social lives at the same time.

For more on dinner with teens, read *Making the Most of Dinner With Adolescents*:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/dinner-with-adolescents

FOR ADULTS

Too often, dinnertime can become a burden that falls on the shoulders of only one person in a household. Make sure to regularly check in with one another about what your family dinners are like and what you want them to become. Creating a shared vision of mealtime, agreeing on division of labor and deciding ahead of time how you'll make the table a no-stress zone will free everyone up to enjoy dinnertime together.

Read more in *Getting off On the Right Foot: Creating a Dinner Ritual*:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/dinner-ritual

Don't forget to include senior family members! If you're able to share your mealtime with elderly parents or grandparents, they can also benefit from some careful attention to helping them be an independent -- and welcome -- dinner guest.

Get expert tips on including seniors in your family dinner: *Why You Should Invite Your Elderly Parents to Dinner*:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/elderly-parents-dinner

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE THOMPSON FAMILY

We're pleased to introduce blogger Brenda Thompson and her family! Brenda is a self-taught meal planning guru and recipe and content developer who loves sharing ideas to save time and money in the kitchen while still eating well. She shares her ideas on her blog, *Meal Planning Magic*.

THE FAMILY:

Brenda and Rick Thompson and their kids, a 16-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son. The Thompsons hail from the suburbs of Houston, TX.

THE GOAL:

Like many families we've interviewed, the Thompsons are striving to make family dinner a near-nightly occurrence. Brenda has her sights set on dinners together at least five nights of the week, but also looks to other moments when she can spend time at the table with her kids. "Mornings together are a priority too," she says. "Even if we're all leaving at different times on weekday mornings, I try to sit with the kids when they have their breakfast and eat mine too. Sometimes it's only five to ten minutes but it keeps our lines of communication open."

THE CHALLENGE:

Even in the summertime, the Thompson kids are busy — busy enough to keep their parents running between sporting events, volunteering and all the social outings that are common for adolescents. During the school year, things are even more jam-packed as after-school activities demand plenty of space on the family calendar. Working around all the commitments is the biggest challenge the family faces as far as family dinner goes, but since Brenda and Rick both have some flexibility in their work schedules, they always find a way to make it work.

THE STRATEGIES:

Not surprisingly for someone who helms a blog titled "Meal Planning Magic," Brenda says that planning and shopping ahead of time are the key to making dinner-time happen in her household. "Dinner might not be at the same time every night," she shares, "but knowing what we have going on helps me plan accordingly." Having the plan and ingredients ready to go each night also makes it easier for the Thompsons to cook together, maximizing family time on the evenings when they can manage to get together for a meal.

Brenda adds that she and Rick have always prioritized family dinners from the time their kids were very small, but that she truly believes any family can get started at any time as long as they keep their flexibility and commitment to spending the time together. "With tools from The Family Dinner Project and other resources, it's something any family can work towards!"

THE FOOD:

Brenda's secret weapon for fast dinners is tacos, made with tortillas or flatbreads and an endless variety of fillings and toppings to suit every palate. She says the family even enjoys creative twists such as a Mediterranean variation using falafel. In addition, the Thompsons enjoy fast and fresh meals like this *Bruschetta Chicken Skillet*, which is perfect for using ripe summer tomatoes.

thefamilydinnerproject.org/simple-bruschetta-chicken-skillet

THE TAKEAWAY:

Brenda says that her biggest learning from connecting with The Family Dinner Project has been the realization that not every family looks the same, so mealtimes will differ as well. "The point is just to get started and connecting with your family weekly!"

THE BEST PART:

"Family dinners together allow us to catch up on what's new with each other from that day but also talk about what's coming up. We love to laugh and tell funny stories at the dinner table and even if dinner together a short part of our whole day, it's a very memorable part of it!"



SIMPLE BRUSCHETTA CHICKEN SKILLET



This recipe was provided to us by Brenda Thompson, blogger and recipe developer at Meal Planning Magic.



Instructions:

1. In a medium bowl, stir together diced tomatoes, cheese and basil. Set aside.
2. In small bowl, combine panko bread crumbs and parmesan cheese. Set aside.
3. Pound chicken breasts to ½-inch thickness. I like to put the chicken in a resealable bag and use a meat mallet to pound the chicken for the least mess. If you don't have a meat mallet, you can also use a rolling pin.
4. In large skillet, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add chicken and saute 1-2 minutes on each side to sear and create a golden brown color. Remove from heat and set aside.
5. Combine tomato sauce and garlic in skillet; add chicken. Top with tomato, cheese and basil mixture, pressing onto chicken.
6. Bring sauce to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and cook 15 minutes or until chicken has reached a safe internal temperature of 165°F.
7. Top with breadcrumb cheese mixture just before serving. We like to serve this with a wild rice pilaf and garden salad.

Ingredients

- 2 Roma tomatoes, diced
OR 1 can diced tomatoes, drained
- ¾ cup shredded Italian blend cheese
- 1 ½ tablespoons dried basil
- 6 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 1 14.5 ounce can tomato sauce
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 2 cups panko bread crumbs
- ¼ cup grated parmesan cheese
- 1 tablespoon Italian herb blend (or use half and half dried basil and oregano)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil



USE YOUR SENSES (OUTDOORS)



After the table is cleared, head outside before dessert. Close your eyes, and ask your family, “What do you hear? What do you smell?” For some guaranteed giggles, encourage your family to imitate the sounds they hear.

You can also play outdoor search or guessing games. For example, you might ask, “Who can find the first star?” or “What do you think the temperature is?” The person who comes closest to the correct answer gets to choose dessert!

thefamilydinnerproject.org/use-your-senses

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RECIPES FOR CONVERSATION

Cut Line



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If you could be free to do anything you wanted all day, what would you do?

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "With freedom comes responsibility."
What do you think that means?

Do you know anyone, in real life or from history, who has fought for freedom? What do you admire about that person?

Imagine you were helping to create a new, independent nation. What kinds of rules do you think would be important to have for all your citizens? What kind of government would you want to set up?



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Cut Line



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

Talk About: The Bill of Rights

Use these conversation starters around your dinner table

What do you know about our Bill of Rights? Why is it important?

What's a right that we don't have but you think we should have?

What rights does everyone deserve?

What is the difference between a right and a privilege?

Do you think rights can or should be adjusted based on circumstances (like not having the right to shout "Fire!" in a crowded theatre)? What are some examples?