

# STARTING A FAMILY DINNER ROUTINE FOR BACK TO SCHOOL



## Food

Summer's not over, even if vacation is! Sweeten your family dinner with the Earl family's Rice Cream Pie!



## Fun

Get back in "school mode" with some literature-themed family dinner ideas from Dr. Anne Fishel!



## Conversation

Celebrate Esther Day -- or any day -- with conversation starters about the power of love!

### RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION Talk About: The Power of Love



Use these conversation starters around your dinner table.

- How does it affect you when someone shows their love for you?
- How does it make you feel to show someone else that you love them? Why?
- Is it easier to say "I love you" to some people, and harder to say it to others? Why?
- Have you ever had to do something difficult in order to show love for someone?
- What's one thing you can do today to spread love in the world?
- How about this week? This month?

During the summer, many families change their dinnertime habits -- meals might become more casual, the schedule might be looser and the rules and expectations that govern school year dinners might relax a little bit. But as you plan for the back-to-school season, you're probably mindful that family dinner needs to find its place among all the other items crowding the calendar. Here's how to start -- or resume -- a school year family dinner routine that works for everyone.

### REMEMBER WHY FAMILY DINNERS ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU.

Why is it important to keep family dinner on your to-do list? Maybe it's the research that shows there are many social, emotional and physical benefits to having dinner together. Maybe it's that your family doesn't have many chances to gather beyond dinnertime. Maybe it's a chance for you to work on healthier eating habits together, or something else totally unique to your family. Whatever it is, try to keep your reasons for family dinner in focus, and make sure to share them with everyone in your household so you all understand why dinnertime is a priority.

Want more reasons to love dinnertime? Learn more about the benefits of family dinner: [thefamilydinnerproject.org/benefits](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/benefits)

### AGREE ON THE GROUND RULES.

Every family will have somewhat different rules surrounding dinner, and that's okay! Your mealtime doesn't have to look like your neighbor's. Especially with older children and teens, having a family discussion about what the expectations will be can make mealtimes more pleasant and positive.

Big picture areas to discuss include:

- Where will we eat? Is it okay to eat in front of the TV, or not? If so, how often? If not, why not?
- How will we manage technology at the table? Are phones and tablets allowed? If so, what level of use is okay? If not, why not?
- Are there conversational rules we want to follow as a family, such as no interrupting,

staying positive, or taking turns choosing topics?

- How should family members react when there's a food they don't enjoy? Is there an alternative available, or not?
- What jobs can each family member do to help make mealtimes happen?

Need some guidance on technology at the table? Check out our resources, presented in partnership with Common Sense Media's #DeviceFreeDinner campaign: [thefamilydinnerproject.org/technology-at-the-table](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/technology-at-the-table) [www.commonsensemedia.org/device-free-dinner](http://www.commonsensemedia.org/device-free-dinner)

### SET A SCHEDULE.

It may not be every night and it may not even be dinner -- remember to think of alternatives like family breakfasts, late-evening snacks, walking desserts and weekend lunches to gather everyone for food, fun and conversation on a schedule that works for you. But make the commitment and set the dates. It takes time to develop a habit you can stick to, so plan for success!

Looking for a way to keep track of your meals? Sign up for our free Dinner Tonight program and get access to our Dinner Tracker, where you can record how many meals you're having together as you work towards your goals! [thefamilydinnerproject.org/getting-started](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/getting-started)

## REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE EARL FAMILY

We're pleased to introduce our special friends the Earls! Lori and Wayne are the parents of famed "nerdfighter" Esther Earl, who was the inspiration for the character of Hazel in John Green's novel "The Fault in our Stars." They, along with Esther's surviving brothers and sisters, have built a foundation around Esther's legacy and celebrate her life each August 3rd with Esther Day, an "alternative Valentine's Day" dedicated to spreading love through everyday acts.

### THE FAMILY:

Lori and Wayne Earl of Quincy, MA; children Graham, 21, and Abe, 13, both of whom live at home; and adult daughters Abby, 28, and Evangeline, 25. Daughter Esther would have been 23 this August 3rd.

### THE GOAL:

Lori recalls growing up in a household where family dinners, and even family breakfasts, were the norm. She says that even now when she visits her parents, who are in their 70s, a proper breakfast eaten together — "with those little pitchers of warmed up syrup, cups of hot tea, stuff that memories are made of" is a must.

As life has gotten busier, she now says she thinks the key for her own family is in just stopping to recognize the value of a meal eaten together, even if it's just with one other person and not the whole tribe. Lori and Wayne try to take at least one of the kids out for a special meal once a week and spend the time focusing on connecting with one another.

### THE CHALLENGE:

"Life happens," Lori says. "And as the children have grown, family dinners have become more sporadic, and much of the time it's just the two of us. The schedules of our two boys still at home, as well as our work schedules, have made family meals more challenging. We've lowered our expectations, but we still long for those family dinners." When the children were younger, Lori and Wayne recall having frequent family dinners, sometimes leading to movie nights or game nights together, or watching the kids ride bikes outside their home. Capturing some of the magic of that ritual when not everyone still lives at home, and grown children have their own lives, is difficult.

### THE STRATEGIES:

The Earls are learning to find a new type of family dinner ritual, incorporating guests, holidays and time spent together when they visit their children in their homes, or vice versa. They may not be daily dinners together, but Lori and Wayne find these to be special times when they can cement the bonds that were created in their original dinner routines long ago. Wayne might even ask everyone to go around the table and answer a particular

question — the kids might roll their eyes, Lori says, but everyone participates!

"We recently visited our eldest daughter in her new home in California," the Earls recall. "It was so ordinary — yet extraordinary! We shared a delicious meal she cooked, and sat around the table together and talked. We missed Esther, and Evangeline was back in New England, but with Abby's new blended family and part of ours, it was community."

### THE FOOD:

These days, the Earl clan looks most forward to the holiday favorites and special food rituals throughout the year: turkey for Thanksgiving, ham at Christmas, Raclette for Graham's birthday. But, Lori says, they can also throw together a simple meal of tacos or curried lentils, and appreciate it all the more because they're eating it with someone else!

Try an Earl family dinner recipe: African Curry:

[thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/earl-familys-african-curry](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/earl-familys-african-curry)

### THE TAKEAWAY:

Lori says "The Family Dinner Project reminded me of something that we used to practice better than we do now — and I really appreciate the reminder! I don't think any of us should feel guilty if family dinners have become something of a lost art; I think that we should set a realistic goal, work towards it and celebrate our success!"

### THE BEST PART:

Daughters Abby and Evangeline both agree on the value of family dinners: Abby says it's coming together to share your experiences at the end of the day, and Evangeline enjoys spending time together and catching up, with a chance to ask everyone else how the day has gone.

### A NOTE FROM THE EARL FAMILY AND THEIR FOUNDATION, THIS STAR WON'T GO OUT:

This Star Won't Go Out invites you to participate via social media in highlighting this day of love—the "non-romantic Valentine's Day," as it were!

Created in collaboration between author John Green and teen Esther, #EstherDay celebrates the love of friends and family, and is especially a day to say "I love you" to the people we so often don't take the time to say it to—the very people that mean the most to us. This day has grown to have a big audience—but we think it's an important enough idea that we'd like to see #EstherDay spread worldwide!

Always, but especially at this time in our world, we can all use a bit more love.





## RICE CREAM PIE



This recipe is a favorite dessert for the Earl family of This Star Won't Go Out. They note that if you have any peanut allergy concerns in your family, you can substitute another type of nut or seed butter, or use a traditional Rice Krispie treat recipe as the basis for your crust.



### Instructions:

1. Allow your ice cream to soften at room temperature for 20-30 minutes.
2. While the ice cream is softening, mix the peanut butter and corn syrup thoroughly.
3. Add the rice krispie cereal to the peanut butter mixture and stir until fully combined.
4. Press the mixture into a pie plate and freeze for 5-10 minutes to set.
5. Scoop the softened ice cream into the prepared crust and smooth to fill the crust evenly.
6. Freeze until firm. Serve with your favorite ice cream toppings!

### Ingredients

- 1/2 cup light corn syrup
- 1/2 cup peanut butter
- 3 cups rice krispie-style cereal
- 1 quart ice cream flavor of your choice (vanilla is the classic choice)
- Ice cream toppings, as desired



## WANT YOUR KIDS TO BE BETTER READERS? HAVE DINNER TOGETHER



As a young child, I loved to imagine myself as a pioneer girl in Little House in the Big Woods, eating fresh snow drizzled with maple syrup. I even pestered my mother to make the treat with the dirty snow that fell on our Manhattan sidewalk. (Didn't happen.)

Food features prominently in many books, from early childhood favorites to best-selling novels. It's natural to want to imitate some of the meals and food traditions in the stories we read — and there are many good reasons to do so. Happily, there are many easier ways to bring together food and reading than eating dirty snow.

### HOW DINNER BUILDS BETTER READERS

For starters, there's the linguistic pairing of reading and eating, seen in such common expressions as "devouring a good book" or being a "voracious" reader. But more fundamentally, kids who have regular family dinners have a real leg up on being good and early readers.

That's because dinner conversation is a terrific vocabulary booster for young kids — even better than reading aloud to them. When a parent talks about her day or tells a funny family story, she usually includes many words that the young child hasn't yet learned but can under-

stand from the context of the story. When kids have bigger vocabularies, they learn to read more easily.

While just getting everyone together for family dinner does build literacy skills, there are additional ways to inspire more reading at the table — no pop quizzes or grammar lessons required!

### ENCOURAGE KIDS TO TELL STORIES

The benefits to kids don't just come from listening to stories. Kids who know how to tell stories are also better readers. In one large study, kindergarteners who were

able to tell stories grew up to be fourth-graders and even seventh-graders with higher reading comprehension than those kindergarteners who lacked narrative skills. Dinner is a prime time for kids to tell stories and to be encouraged to tell better stories. Researchers have found that kids can be taught to tell better stories with a few simple prompts:

- Reminisce with your kids about past experiences you've shared. "Remember when we forgot to take the brownies out of the oven?"
- Ask a lot of open-ended questions, including plenty of "why" and "how" questions rather than questions with "yes" or "no" answers.
- Encourage longer stories by repeating what your child says or elaborating on her story. Instead of deciding which story to tell, follow your child's lead on the story she wants to talk about.

In one study, kids who were given these instructions had bigger vocabularies and told more complex stories a year later.

## MAKE A LITERARY MEAL

There are also other, tastier connections between food and books. Consider all the children's books that feature food as a central force in the action. There are the magical noodles in *Strega Nona*, the pomegranate that lures Persephone to Hades, the irresistible Turkish Delight in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and that whimsical tribute to picky eaters, *Green Eggs and Ham*.

Try recreating a favorite literary meal for dinner, and then read that book (or a portion of it) aloud. Split pea soup from *George and Martha* or spaghetti and meatballs from *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* are two possibilities. And don't forget the many nursery rhymes that involve porridge, rice pudding, and blackbird pie (to name just a few). It could be fun to imagine what Harry Potter's feasts at Hogwarts are like, or to create a high tea that Mary Poppins might like.

And of course, it's not just children's literature that gets our mouths watering. Melville devotes a chapter to clam chowder in *Moby Dick*, and in Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*, the philandering husband gets his comeuppance with a key lime pie in the face.

## HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BOOKS

On slips of paper, try writing each of these questions and placing them in a jar in the middle of the table. Then each family member can pick out a question, answer it, or try another one.

- What books have you read more than once?
- What is your favorite place to read?
- What are the differences for you in reading a printed book versus one on a device like an e-reader?
- What is your favorite food scene from a book?

- What food have you read about that you'd most like to eat?
- What book was made worse as a movie?
- What book was improved as a movie?
- If you had to write a title for your memoir, what would it be?
- If you wrote a book about your life, what role would food play in it?
- What book character would you want to be friends with?

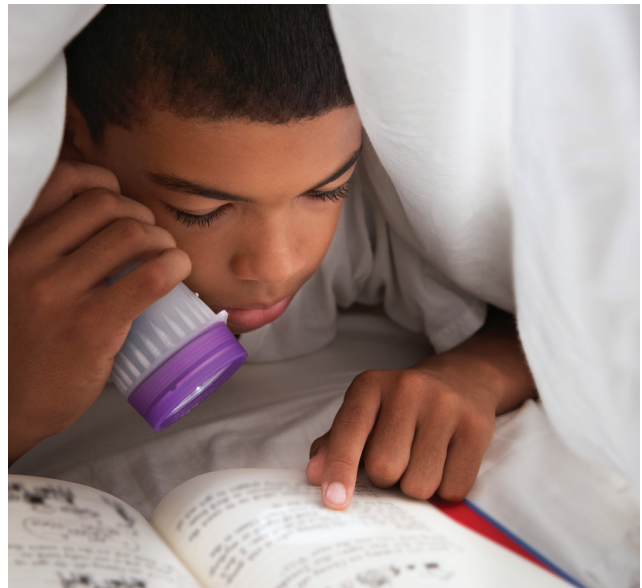
## PLAY A LITERARY GAME

Each participant writes down the names of five characters from books, on separate slips of paper. Mix up all the pieces of paper in a bowl and place it on the table during dinner.

As the meal unfolds, each participant takes a turn drawing a name from the bowl and describes the person to the group. The only rule is that the describer cannot say the character's name or any part of the name. The rest of the group has to try to guess what character is being described. Once the person has been guessed correctly, try to guess which dinner guest put the name in the bowl!

Whether you make a literary dish, talk about books, tell stories at the table or play a literary game, you'll be encouraging your kids to read. And if it's just a tired weekday night and all you can muster is eggs and toast, remember that merely having dinner and talking at the table can, all by itself, help your kids to become better readers.

For the full article, go to:  
[thefamilydinnerproject.org/kids-reading](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/kids-reading)







## RECIPES FOR CONVERSATION

Scan the QR Code to Sign up for our Email Newsletter



### RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

Talk About: The Power of Love

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How does it make you feel to show someone else that you love them?

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Have you ever had to do something difficult in order to show your love for someone?

What's one thing you can do today to spread love in the world?  
How about this week? This month?



Cut Line