

BRING CALM TO THE FAMILY DINNER TABLE



Food

10-year-old Neala rated these burgers as one of the family dinners that makes her smile after a long day at school!



Fun

Try something completely different with an Upside-down and Backwards Night!



Conversation

September 25 is CASA Family Day. Try keeping tabs on your family's stress levels -- and your own -- with these calming conversation starters from our friends at Family Day!

3 RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION Talk About: Managing Stress



Use these conversation starters around your dinner table. How do you know when you're stressed? How does it feel? Does it affect your outlook?

Are there any people, places, or events that make you less stressed?

What are some activities you like to do to help you relax? How do they help?

Do you notice when friends or family members are stressed? What do you notice?

One parent we know recently summed up her feelings about September: "It's like I can feel the calendar closing in on me and all the activities and craziness just flooding back in." Now that kids are back to school (or nearly), sign-up sheets are coming home and calendars are filling quickly. If the parents feel rushed and crazed by September, how are the kids feeling?

It's easy to let that rushed feeling carry over to the dinner table, where -- if you're able to get there at all -- you might find yourself prompting family members to hurry up, filling the conversation with reminders and logistics, receiving grumpy attitudes from the family and losing your patience. But a tense, hurried family dinner isn't much good for anyone. Here's how to slow down, focus on your time together and make the dinner table a place of calm for everyone.

SET THE MOOD.

Whether you choose to eat at a table, around the kitchen island or gathered on the living room sofas, mark the shift between everyday life and dinnertime by making the space especially welcoming. You don't have to go crazy with fancy china, but clear the homework clutter, turn on some music and make sure there's a comfortable spot for everyone.

Get more dinnertime mood inspiration:

Four Steps to a More Mindful Mealtime
thefamilydinnerproject.org/mindful-mealtime/

Nature's Centerpiece
thefamilydinnerproject.org/bringing-outdoors-indoors

Make a Family Dinner Playlist
thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/music-please/

The Where of Family Dinners
thefamilydinnerproject.org/where-of-family-dinners

SERVE SOME FAVORITES.

Battling over the food -- who's eating what, who's not, how many bites need to be eaten and who's getting dessert -- is one of the fastest ways to invite tension to the dinner table, and it can also be responsible for worsening, not improving, picky eating habits. Try this: Every night, make sure to serve at least one well-liked item, so no one goes hungry (and try to ignore what they're NOT eating). That basket of bread or platter of fruit might be the easiest sanity-saver you've ever encountered!

Find more support for picky eaters:

School Chef Offers Good Advice for Picky Eaters
thefamilydinnerproject.org/school-chef-advice-picky-eaters

Helping Selective Eaters Try New Foods

thefamilydinnerproject.org/try-new-foods

That's Disgusting! Encouraging Picky Eaters

thefamilydinnerproject.org/encourage-picky-eaters

Don't Yuck On My Yum

thefamilydinnerproject.org/dont-yuck

AVOID ACADEMICS.

...Or chores, reminders and anything else that could turn into "nagging." Steer table topics towards things family members feel proud of, are looking forward to or want to share.

Try these Back-to-School questions to get your family talking, and use these tips to deepen -- not derail -- your family conversations!

thefamilydinnerproject.org/back-school-questions
thefamilydinnerproject.org/questions-foster-conversation

LAUGH.

Laughter is one of the quickest, best ways to relax. Don't be afraid to bring some silliness to dinner with you -- joke contests, funny faces, tongue twisters or Pig Latin might not pass the "manners test" at your Grandma's Sunday table, but you can make them welcome at your mealtimes!

Look for more laughter-inducing ideas:

Try our creative way to make Whipped Cream!
thefamilydinnerproject.org/make-whipped-cream

Cat and Cow
thefamilydinnerproject.org/cat-and-cow

Would You Rather?
thefamilydinnerproject.org/would-rather

Joke Jar
thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/joke-jar/

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE NOGUEIRA FAMILY

Meet the Nogueiras! Michelle is an addiction counselor who specializes in helping families manage technology, and she found The Family Dinner Project through our Tech at the Table resources with our friends at Common Sense Media. After hearing from Michelle about how she was using our resources both personally and professionally, we invited her to share her family's story!

THE FAMILY:

Michelle and John Nogueira and son Noah (13), of Guelph, Ontario Canada.

THE GOAL:

Both Michelle and John grew up in households where family dinners were extremely important. In John's Portuguese family, dinnertime was a time to be savored, where family members would linger at the table after eating to enjoy one another's company. For Michelle, Sunday dinners were a weekly tradition to look forward to, and making the same meals for her own family now brings her back to her childhood.

But as John observes, the Nogueiras "lead busy, separate lives," making dinnertime both more challenging and more important. The current goal is for the family to eat most of their meals together, around the dining table, without any digital distractions — including television. John and Michelle hope to recreate some of the connection and warmth of family meals from their own childhoods.

THE CHALLENGE:

Unlike many busy families, the Nogueiras don't find it particularly difficult to get everyone to the table for meals on a regular basis. What's hard, Michelle reflects, is staying there. "Our biggest challenge is being thoughtful and intentional around dinnertime," she says, "taking time to slow down, enjoy meals, eat slowly and connect as a family." She says she actually has to force herself to just sit and be in the moment at mealtimes, and similarly, John is constantly reminding Noah to slow down and not rush away from the table.

"With busy schedules it seems like everything is so rushed. It's very easy to rush through dinner, eat fast, and quickly leave the table to do all the other things that need to get done versus enjoying the whole experience."

THE STRATEGIES:

Incorporating a routine conversation starter into their meals has been helpful for the Nogueira family, setting the tone for mealtimes and getting everyone to be

mindful of their time together at the table. The family enjoys the "Rose and Thorn" activity and uses it nightly — so much so that now, when Noah brings friends over for dinner, they ask "Are we going to do that thing you guys do at meals?"

THE FOOD:

The unanimous favorite in the Nogueira household is not only a cherished family dinner menu, but also their traditional Christmas Eve feast: Barbecued steak, baked potatoes loaded with butter, sour cream, cheese and bacon, Caesar salad, sauteed mushrooms and onions and fresh bread.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Michelle says she has really learned the value of a family "check in" at dinnertime. "A check in allows us to slow down, listen and pay attention to one another, and it always leads to further discussion." She says that the Rose and Thorn format works best because "it gives family members an opportunity to listen and be heard. It also naturally promotes connectivity, understanding, patience and problem solving. A big thank you to The Family Dinner Project team!"

THE BEST PART:

Michelle: "The best part of family dinners is having the time to chat, connect, laugh, enjoy the food and be 'in the know' with each other's lives."

John: "Meal times give us an opportunity to see and catch up with each other along with belonging to something larger than our individual selves."

Noah: "Family meal times are important to me because I get to talk to my parents...many people don't have a good relationship with their parents, but I have a great relationship with my parents. Having 'tech free' mealtimes is also important because it is a good time to unplug and connect. My friends especially like the (Rose and Thorn) check-in because they often don't eat together with their families."



INSIDE-OUT BURGERS



These burgers are a fun twist on a classic family favorite! You can easily omit the cheese stuffing for anyone who prefers their burgers plain. 10-year-old Neala ranked this as the #1 family dinner that makes her smile after a long day at school!



Instructions:

1. Preheat a grill, grill pan or griddle.
2. In a small bowl, combine the garlic powder, salt and pepper.
3. In a large bowl, mix the ground beef with half of the seasoning mix.
4. Divide the ground beef into four equal portions. Shape each into a ball.
5. Use your thumb to make an indentation in each ball. Place 1 tablespoon of your desired cheese in each indentation, then carefully shape the meat around it so the cheese is completely encased inside the ball of meat.
6. Flatten each ball and shape into a patty.
7. Sprinkle the remaining seasoning mix evenly over the patties.
8. Grill the burgers for 3-4 minutes per side for medium rare. Allow them to rest for a few minutes before serving.
9. Serve the burgers on your favorite buns with lettuce, sliced tomato, and condiments of your choice!

Ingredients

Serves 4

- 1 lb. ground beef, 85%-90% lean
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/2 tsp. ground black pepper
- 1/2 tsp. garlic powder
- 1/4 cup shredded cheddar or swiss cheese or 1/4 cup soft goat or blue cheese
- 4 burger buns



UPSIDE DOWN AND BACKWARDS



Start a breakfast or dinner tradition around the theme of upside down and backwards! Maybe it's once a month—or once a year—but pull out all the stops. Have breakfast for dinner: Dress in your favorite pajamas and eat pancakes, cereal or eggs. Invite friends, or the stuffed animals. Or try dinner for breakfast! Cold pizza anyone? Or if you're feeling really crazy, an occasional dessert-before dinner-evening (say an ice cream appetizer?) never hurt anyone. You can also think of other activities that might go along with an upside-down tradition, like reading bedtime stories at breakfast or having dinner in bed. It's your family's tradition, so get as kooky as you want!



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

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Are there any people, places, or events that make you feel more or less stressed?

What are some activities you like to do to help you relieve stress? How do they help?

Do you notice when friends or family members are feeling stressed? What do you notice?

Tell me about a time you have felt really stressed. How did you handle it? Is there anything you would do differently now?



Cut Line