

DOES FAMILY DINNER SCARE YOU?



Food

Harvest Popcorn Balls are a sweet treat for the season!



Fun

Try putting a Halloween twist on this Story Stones activity. How many spooky and seasonal ideas can you create?



Conversation

Why not Family Dinner and a Movie? Check out our guide to "It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown!"



October is a month of thrills and chills, when people delight in telling their favorite horror stories. While we hope that the family dinner table is a place for enjoying the fun and excitement of storytelling, we also know some families who would say that dinnertime has given them a few scary stories to tell!

Never fear -- just as jack-o-lanterns can light up the night and Mom and Dad can check to be sure there are no real monsters under the bed, there are ways to banish the ghosts of family dinners past and make the table a fun, positive place for everyone. Here are our suggestions for tackling the “scary” things that might be keeping you away from the table.

FAMILY DINNER HORROR #1: BAD CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

We've heard from many people who tell us that they grew up with family dinners that have scared them away from the table as adults. Overbearing grown-ups, angry exchanges and force-feeding are just some of the memories on the list of horror stories we've heard.

If you're in the “bad memories” club, these resources can help you get back to the dinner table for a much better experience with your own family:

Getting off on the Right Foot
thefamilydinnerproject.org/right-foot/

Creating Meaningful Conversation
thefamilydinnerproject.org/foster-conversation/

Taking the Stress out of Family Dinner (from the Washington Post). Find the link in our online Newsletter:
thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/does-family-dinner-scare-you/

FAMILY DINNER HORROR #2: BEHAVIOR GONE WILD

We're the first people to say that going overboard on stressing manners at the expense of an enjoyable mealtime is a quick way to ruin family dinner for everyone. But on the other hand, no one can relax when the behavior at the table is truly out of control.

Try these tips to help strike the balance between “Elbows off the table” perfection and “Finger painting on the walls” rebellion:

Answering Real Moms' Family Dinner Questions
thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/answering-real-moms/

Make Your Toddler a Cooperative Diner
thefamilydinnerproject.org/toddler-cooperative/

The Origins of Manners
thefamilydinnerproject.org/manners/

And check out the “Common Challenges” section of our FAQ page for even more advice!
thefamilydinnerproject.org/resources/faq/

FAMILY DINNER HORROR #3: HEAPING HELPINGS OF TENSION

Too many families avoid eating dinner together because they are tired of dealing with a mealtime atmosphere that feels more like punishment than family time. Whether it's teens who won't talk, sibling conflicts or conversations that always seem to end in arguments, any constant source of tension at the table is bound to scare people away.

Explore ways to make dinnertime safe and welcoming for the whole family:

How to Beat Tension and Conflict from Your Family Dinner
thefamilydinnerproject.org/beat-tension/

Steps to Ease Dinner Stress for Stepfamilies
thefamilydinnerproject.org/steps/

Making the Most of Dinner with Adolescents
thefamilydinnerproject.org/adolescents/

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE ELDER FAMILY



Kathy Elder is a teacher from Evansville, Indiana who connected with The Family Dinner Project to help provide resources to her students and their families. Here, we catch up with Kathy to learn more about what family dinners look like at her house!

THE FAMILY:

Kathy Elder, her 21-year-old daughter, and her father, Floyd, 73. The Elders hail from Evansville, Indiana.

THE GOAL:

Kathy explains that family dinner is “something I’ve always done,” so at this point, her routine at home is settled. What she hopes to do now is to inspire her students and their families to have more frequent and meaningful meals.

THE CHALLENGE:

In the Elder household, timing is often the biggest challenge to be overcome, as Kathy’s daughter is in college and has her own schedule to keep. It’s a challenge shared by many of the families at the school where Kathy teaches, along with popular misconceptions about dinnertime — it’s too much of a burden on Mom or Dad every night, family dinner “doesn’t count” if it’s not a home-cooked meal, it’s too hard to find foods everyone will enjoy — that she tries to dispel through her work.

THE STRATEGIES:

To help combat the anxiety and stress that may be keeping families from the table, Kathy takes a proactive approach with her school community. She teaches her students to prepare easy, healthy items, which they share at a Family Dinner tasting booth during the school’s family fun night

each year. Along with the food, Kathy and her students hand out recipes and model conversation starters and games that families can use when they eat together. She also teaches her students — and reinforces with their families — the importance of family dinners, making sure that everyone knows why eating together on a regular basis is beneficial to all members of the household.

THE FOOD:

We asked Kathy what the favorite dinners are in her household. Her answer was pot roast, followed by spaghetti for her daughter, and her father’s favorite fried chicken. They also all enjoy this easy White Chicken Chili recipe!

thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/elder-family-white-chicken-chili/

THE TAKEAWAY:

Family dinner has been a constant in the Elder house, and Kathy hopes to keep leading by example in her school community so more families can enjoy the benefits of shared meals.

THE BEST PART:

“The time to keep up with each other’s lives,” Kathy says.



HARVEST POPCORN BALLS



We've added dried cranberries and pumpkin seeds to this iconic sweet treat, which boosts the flavor and the nutrients for a "better-for-you" popcorn ball. You can substitute any dried fruits and seeds or nuts that you'd prefer; try different combinations to find the mix that your family likes best!



Instructions:

1. Combine the butter and marshmallows in a small saucepan. Cook and stir until melted.
2. Add the cinnamon to the marshmallow mixture, stir, and allow to cook for 1 additional minute.
3. In a large bowl, combine the popcorn, pumpkin seeds, and cranberries.
4. Pour the marshmallow mixture over the popcorn mix and stir carefully, until everything is evenly coated.
5. Using slightly wet hands (to prevent sticking), form the mixture into balls about the size of a baseball, pressing firmly to compact the ingredients so they'll hold their shape. You should get about 12 popcorn balls.
6. Set the popcorn balls on a sheet pan to dry for 30 minutes.

Ingredients

- 8 cups popped popcorn, no butter or salt added
- 2 cups miniature marshmallows
- 1/4 cup unsalted butter
- 1/2 tsp. cinnamon
- 2/3 cup roasted salted pumpkin seeds (also called pepitas)
- 1 cup dried cranberries

STORY STONES



This one requires some prep—but that's fun too!

Find several small, smooth stones and have the kids paint a little animal, plant, person, or other object on each one (nail polish and paint pens both do the trick, and little paper cards work as well as stones). Then, place the stones in a basket and keep them near the table.

To play, pass the basket around and as each person draws a stone, the challenge is to add a few sentences featuring that animal, plant, person or object to the story. The story ends when all the stones have been drawn.



TALKING ABOUT THE GREAT PUMPKIN



This October marks the 50th anniversary of “It’s The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown,” an iconic Halloween television special that has been a staple of the season in American homes since its first broadcast. Lighthearted news reports are starting to surface, detailing various celebrations of the occasion — including a series of Peanuts-themed corn mazes across the country.

As with most classics, the staying power of “The Great Pumpkin” has much to do with the accessibility and timeless quality of its story. However, “Peanuts” creator Charles Schulz also managed to pack a lot of wisdom and universally teachable moments into his Halloween special. Try re-watching “The Great Pumpkin” as a family (or watching for the first time!), then discuss it over dinner:

- The story of “The Great Pumpkin” centers on Linus, who firmly believes in The Great Pumpkin even though everyone else makes fun of him for it. Have you ever stuck to a belief or an opinion, even when others have tried to talk you out of it?
- Lucy tells Charlie Brown that his invitation to the Halloween party must have been a mistake, because “there were two lists: One to invite, and one not to invite.” What do you think about Lucy’s behavior? If you were hosting a Halloween party, who would be on the guest list? Do you think it’s ever okay to leave someone off the list, and if so, how would you handle it?



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- Sally gives up trick-or-treating to stay in the pumpkin patch with Linus. Have you ever changed your plans to make someone else happy? Were you happy with your decision, or not? Why?
- Snoopy spends much of “The Great Pumpkin” imagining that he’s the World War I Flying Ace. If you could imagine yourself as any historical hero, who would you choose and why?
- Linus says, “There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people: Religion, politics, and The Great Pumpkin.” Why do you think he feels this way? Do you think there are certain topics that shouldn’t be discussed? Does it depend on who you’re talking to or where you are?

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