

HOW TO GIVE YOURSELF THE GIFT OF FAMILY DINNER THIS SEASON



Food

Take the night off and put the kids in charge of making English Muffin Pizzas for dinner!



Fun

Try one of our Top 10 ideas to make family dinner special during the holiday season.



Conversation

Get everyone in the giving spirit with this Recipe for Conversation!



It's a funny thing, but when you ask most adults we know what they want most this holiday season, they're hard-pressed to come up with anything to put on their wish lists. Sure, we all make jokes like "a nap" or "a clean house" or "a vacation to Tahiti," but when it comes right down to it, once you reach a certain age the gift-giving of the season is really for the kids. What adults are looking for, if we're honest, is more of the intangible stuff: More time together, more memories, more peace.

The trouble with the gift-giving mindset is that it too often means that we either feel like we have to set our own desires aside in order to give to others, or that we wait and hope that someone else will see what we really want and make it happen for us. But why not change things up and give yourself the gifts you really want this year?

This December, we challenge all the stressed-out, overcommitted adults out there to give themselves the gifts of time, connection and peace (or at least, relative peace -- let's not kid ourselves that those 2-year-old twins are suddenly going to become quiet, well-behaved model citizens). Here's how to engage the whole family in giving you the quality time you deserve this year.

DELEGATE DINNER TO SOMEONE ELSE FOR A CHANGE.

Maybe that's the pizza delivery guy, or maybe you empower your first-grader to assemble peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for everyone. Bonus points for using paper plates so there are not after-dinner dishes! Try delegating once a week this month, and use the extra energy to play table games or linger for a longer conversation together.

Play *The Craziest Gift* to get everyone in the spirit of the season:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/craziest-gift/

TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO TURN FAMILY DINNER INTO DATE NIGHT.

Sure, family dinners are for the whole family, and they have great benefits for the kids -- but part of what stresses parents out at this time of year is the constant feeling that they're pouring everything they've got into making the season magical for everyone else. Just for one evening, try putting

the kids to bed early (or letting them sleep over at Grandma's) and focus on a date night in with your partner. Lay out an indoor picnic and spend time together, so you've got more energy to give to the kids the next day.

Get more ideas for connecting as a couple over dinner:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/family-starts-with-two/

DISCONNECT -- NOT FROM YOUR FAMILY, BUT FROM YOUR PHONES AND LAPTOPS, AT LEAST FOR THE DINNER HOUR.

If this is hard for you, aim for once a week to begin with and then see if you can work your way up. One family we know suggested a weekly "pioneer" dinner where they actually get rid of ALL modern conveniences while they eat. (Candles, anyone?) You might not go that far, but the idea could help you hold that tech-free space.

Get more tips for going tech-free at the table:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/technology-at-the-table/

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE MCLAUGHLIN FAMILY

Introducing: The McLaughlin family! This tight-knit family of four (three at home) shares how they prioritize family time and what family dinners mean to them.

THE FAMILY:

Mark and Janeth McLaughlin, 20-year-old daughter Gabrielle (who's no longer living at home) and son Jhaedyn, 11. The McLaughlins hail from Salisbury, MA.

THE GOAL:

The McLaughlins prioritize having dinner together every night of the week, despite the typical challenges that face all busy families. "There are the occasional times during the week that illness, travel and extracurricular activities cause us to change the daily plan," says Janeth, "but we always manage to come together...even if through a phone call."

THE CHALLENGE:

Like most families we hear from, the McLaughlins struggle most with time management. Between busy work schedules for Janeth and Mark, and a typical on-the-go calendar for pre-teen Jhaedyn, actually managing to get a meal prepared and on the table to enjoy together at a reasonable hour can be a feat. But Janeth reflects on her upbringing as one of 10 children to help inspire her. "My mom was a schoolteacher and dad worked hard to provide, but always was home for dinner. It's from these many family dinner times that I remember and embrace the importance of thanking God for his blessings, the focus of individuals within a family, gathering around the table at the end of the day and in doing so, keeping the lines of communication open in a very busy home."

THE STRATEGIES:

The McLaughlin family's strategy for gathering at dinnertime is simple: Make it happen. "No matter

how long and busy the day has been, whether dinner is a sit down, eat-out or everyone-for-themselves type of meal, it is important to make a point to end the day together." Both Mark and Janeth boil down the reasoning behind their firm adherence to prioritizing dinner by pointing out the unspoken message that eating together sends to the family:

"It is important to us as a family to spend time asking each other about our days and letting each other know that amidst the chaos of the day, in the end, he or she is ultimately what matters in our lives."

THE FOOD:

Baked potatoes and salad are the sides that please everyone at the McLaughlin table, but preferences for main dishes vary. Mark likes seafood, Janeth prefers salmon, and Jhaedyn likes baked beans and bacon — extra crispy, if you please.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Through connecting with The Family Dinner Project, Janeth says the family has stayed open-minded about trying new recipes and different games, conversation starters and other ways to keep dinnertime fun and engaging for everyone.

THE BEST PART:

Jhaedyn: "Coming together, because it is when we finally see each other after being separated all day."

Mark: "Seeing each other, giving thanks for the day's blessings and talking to each other."

Janeth: "I like hearing from my son the appreciation for a home cooked meal. He never fails to say thank you to us for providing. I like listening to them both as they break down the day's events. I just love being with my family; we always end up the evening cuddling in one way or another."



ENGLISH MUFFIN PIZZAS



These English muffin pizzas are one of the quickest and easiest ways to get dinner on the table in a flash!



Instructions:

1. Top the English muffin halves evenly with sauce and cheese.
2. Toast or bake until the cheese is melted.

Ingredients

Serves 4

- 1 cup leftover simple tomato sauce
- 4 English muffins, split
- 1.5 cups shredded cheese



Top Ten Family Dinner Tips for the Holidays

10 ways to focus on fun and family at your dinner table this season, so you can keep your mealtimes on track AND enjoy some extra special moments together.

- 1** Make dinner a pajama party, complete with favorite snacks!
- 2** Bring old photos or a family tree to the table and share family stories and holiday memories.
- 3** Teach someone how to make a special family recipe. Tell them why it's special to you.
- 4** Turn dinnertime into a holiday singalong. Bonus points for making up silly new words!
- 5** Take turns reading from a favorite holiday storybook during dinner.
- 6** Make a screen time exception and enjoy dinner and a movie in front of a favorite holiday film.
- 7** Enjoy a wintertime walking dessert together (holiday cookies or hot cocoa in thermal cups are good choices) and take in the night sky and holiday lights in your neighborhood.
- 8** Brainstorm random acts of kindness and challenge one another to complete them the next day.
- 9** Talk about favorite holiday traditions and make up a new one to try this year!
- 10** Leave love notes at everyone's plates and share them during dinner.



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

Talk About: Giving



Use these conversation starters around your dinner table

How does it make you feel to give to others?

Would you rather give, or receive a gift? Why?

What's the oddest or funniest gift you've ever received?

Who is it hardest to give to? Why?

If you could give something special to one person, who would you choose and what would you give to them?

thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/give-yourself-gift-of-family-dinner/

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