

LOOKING BACK: A YEAR'S WORTH OF FAMILY DINNERS



Food

In some countries lentils are a traditional New Year's food -- their shape symbolizes wealth & prosperity. Try them in this recipe from our friends at AAFCS!



Fun

Use family dinner as a time to reflect back and look forward with our Reflecting and Resolving activity.



Conversation

Start the year off with some thoughts about how to improve your community. Try our Civic Conversation Starters at the dinner table.



As a New Year begins, most of us are doing two things: reflecting on the year that's just passed, and making resolutions for the one ahead of us. When it comes to the family dinner table, both of those activities can be useful in making your mealtimes the best they can be.

Over the past year, we've learned so much from real families about the way they make family dinners work in their homes. Here's a look back at some of our favorite pieces of wisdom from families like yours:

"In high school we gave him five 'get out of dinner' passes, which he ended up rarely using. By junior year he confessed his gratitude for the dinners.... our 'strictness about these stupid dinners' gave him a great out when his friends tried to sway him to challenge us."

~ The Darvick Family

"Family is most definitely the foundation of any child's life. The Family Dinner Project showed me that to be successful in life, a bond with your family is important."

~ The Townsend Family

"With feeding seven people, if three people will actually eat it, we call it a meal!" ~ The Swanson 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 McLaughlin Family

"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 Nogueira Family

We're not done learning from families about their dinners, and we hope you'll share your experiences with us! As we look ahead to the New Year, we're asking followers of The Family Dinner Project to complete a short survey about their dinnertime habits, to help us further improve our content and programs for families. All survey participants can enter to win an Amazon gift card!

COMPLETE THE SURVEY NOW

surveymonkey.com/r/TFDP2018Survey

Thank you for your ongoing engagement with The Family Dinner Project!
Happy New Year!

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE MCLAUGHLIN FAMILY

Meet the Andersons! We met Danielle Anderson through our work with Montana No Kid Hungry, and were inspired to share her family's personal dinner journey here.

THE FAMILY:

Danielle and Dane Anderson and kids Finn (5) and Oliver (1), of Plentywood, Montana.

THE GOAL:

The Andersons are currently working on making dinnertime engaging and fun for everyone, especially 5-year-old Finn. "With all the pulls of the world today," Danielle says, "making dinnertime a fun and engaging experience can be tough." To make time at the table as interesting as all the potential distractions, Danielle and Dane try to have a few interesting questions ready for Finn each night. They're also using dinnertime to help Finn work on his letters and phonics, skills he's picking up in kindergarten and enjoys reinforcing through games at the table with his parents. Danielle hopes that these strategies will make dinner "nourishing for his body and his brain."

THE CHALLENGE:

Because of busy schedules, staying on top of planning for dinnertime — both the food and the necessary engagement strategies to keep everyone happy at the table — can be tricky for the Andersons. Danielle is a dietitian, so she has a strong understanding of both how to plan meals and why it's important to do so, but admits that sometimes the challenges of being a working parent of two active young children can force meal planning to take a backseat. "Then I'm rushing to figure something out on my way home from work," she shares. The "fun" part of dinner is also tough when life gets hectic:

"AS WORKING PARENTS, OUR MINDS CAN OFTEN BE KEEPING TRACK OF A MILLION THINGS AND THINKING OF FUN, NEW AND ENGAGING QUESTIONS JUST ISN'T HAPPENING."

THE STRATEGIES:

To help fill in the gaps on those busy evenings when a healthy meal and engaging conversation or game aren't already planned out, Danielle and Dane have signed up for The Family Dinner Project's Dinner Tonight program, which sends a recipe, conversation starter and game to their inboxes every weekday. When Danielle finds herself rushing home without a game plan for dinner, "those are the days when I'm so thankful to receive TFDP's emails with a delicious recipe...I love printing off the emails with the recipes and conversation starters and using them in my

home."

In addition to taking a little help from TFDP when needed, the Andersons have followed the example set by Dane's parents and made family dinner a priority. Danielle says that she grew up in a home with working parents who often couldn't make family dinners happen, and she was always jealous of friends whose families did gather around the table. When she and Dane married, he came from a home where family dinners were important, so the Andersons have made sure to set that example for their own kids. In their ongoing quest to keep table time engaging, they have a no technology rule and limit distractions so they can all connect during dinner.

Danielle also recommends making sure that the meal preparation itself is fun, rather than a "chore" that needs to be endured. The Anderson family likes to turn on music while they cook and will sometimes find themselves having a spontaneous dance party in the kitchen. When there's time, eldest son Finn gets in on the action and helps prepare the meal; when there's not, Danielle and Dane encourage letting the kids do something that keeps them happy while the parents work to get a fast meal together, even if it means indulging in a little screen time. As long as the screens don't follow the kids to the table, avoiding the pre-dinner meltdown sometimes means doing whatever it takes!

THE FOOD:

Danielle says the whole family loves to be adventurous and try new flavors at dinnertime. She loosely follows a "themed" meal plan each week, which includes Meatless Monday, Taco Tuesday and "Ethnic" Thursday — all of which present great opportunities to try new recipes and flavor combinations that fall outside the usual fare for most families with young children.

THE BEST PART:

The talking! Danielle and Dane enjoy hearing from Finn about his day, and have adapted what they've learned from TFDP to get more information from him. "We try to ask if anything made him happy, sad, and if he did anything kind or helpful. Then we'll take turns answering so we all get to share. These questions prompt him to think about his day and if we didn't specifically ask him, these topics might not come up. We've learned a lot by trying to work this into our family dinner."



CORN AND TURKEY MEATBALL LENTIL SOUP



This recipe, originally found in the 2015 Healthy Lunchtime Challenge Cookbook, was shared with us by our friends at the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS).



Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Spray a large baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray.
2. Use a food processor to make breadcrumbs from the bread slices.
3. In a large bowl, combine the breadcrumbs, turkey, eggs and basil and mix thoroughly.
4. Roll the mixture into 1-inch meatballs and place on the prepared baking sheet. Bake, turning the meatballs every 5 minutes to prevent overly browning, for 25 minutes.
5. In a large pot, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the garlic, corn, celery, carrots and tomatoes and cook for about 20 minutes, until the vegetables are softened and the tomatoes are reduced.
6. Add the lentils and stir, then add chicken broth, chili powder and cumin. Increase the heat to high and bring to a boil.
7. Stir one more time, then reduce the heat to a simmer, cover, and cook for an additional 45 minutes or until the lentils are tender. Season with salt and pepper.
8. Stir in the turkey meatballs, being careful not to break them as you stir. For the best-tasting soup and a little more thickness, cook for an additional hour.
9. Serve hot with mozzarella on top and whole-wheat pita chips on the side for dipping.

Ingredients

Serves 4

- 2 slices whole-wheat bread
- 3/4 lb. lean ground turkey
- 2 large eggs
- 1 Tablespoon chopped fresh basil leaves
- 2 Tablespoons olive oil
- 8 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
- 2 1/2 cups sweet kernel corn
- 1 1/2 cups carrots, peeled and diced into 1/4-inch pieces
- 1 cup celery, chopped
- 2 1/2 cups tomatoes, diced
- 1 1/2 cups lentils, rinsed
- 11 cups reduced sodium chicken broth
- 1 1/2 tsp. chili powder
- 1 Tablespoon ground cumin
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Shredded mozzarella cheese and whole wheat pita chips for serving



REFLECTING AND RESOLVING



Have family members write down their five proudest moments from the past year, as well as five things they'd like to accomplish in the new year. Once you've gathered for dinner, share your accomplishments and hopes!

thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/reflecting-and-resolving/



CIVIC CONVERSATION STARTERS



Start the year off with some thoughts about how to improve your community. Try our Civic Conversation Starters at the dinner table. Go online to view our suggestions:

thefamilydinnerproject.org/civic-conversation/

thefamilydinnerproject.org/civic-conversation/

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