

FAMILY DINNER: IT'S GOOD FOR YOU



Food

Looking for green recipes for Saint Patrick's Day? Keep vegetables at the forefront with these tasty Green Confetti Pancakes!



Fun

Engage the kids in food, fun and conversation all at once -- and reinforce healthy habits -- with a Grocery Scavenger Hunt!



Conversation

Shared meals matter! Use these conversation starters about family dinner at your table.



March is National Nutrition Month. For many families, nutrition is a top priority at the dinner table. Parents worry about whether or not they're serving enough vegetables (and whether the kids are eating enough of them!). What's on the plate, and how much of it is consumed, often becomes the focus of dinnertime.

It's easy to see why. Good nutrition makes a big difference in overall health, and family dinners certainly do a lot to boost positive outcomes: Research shows that people who regularly sit down to dinner with their families consume fewer fried foods and sugary drinks, have a reduced risk of obesity and better lifelong eating habits. Teens even have better body image and lower risk of eating disorders when they share meals with their families. But the benefits of family dinner can go far beyond the physical. This month, we encourage you to think about nutrition not just for your family's bodies, but for their minds and spirits as well.

How can dinnertime make your whole family happier, healthier and smarter? Here are some ideas to make family dinner nutritious in every way:

Get healthy

- How much you eat can be as important as what you eat! Check out blogger Bettina Siegel's words of wisdom about asking kids "Are You Full?"
- Setting yourself up for success makes cooking healthy dinners easier. Here, one father shares his list for a well-stocked pantry.
- Making healthy food appealing is often a struggle for busy families. Try some of the recipes in our Before and Afters section for kid-friendly takes on fruits and vegetables!

Get smart

- Build literacy and sequencing skills in younger kids with storytelling games like Story by Sentence and Story Starters.
- Use activities like State Capitals, the Alphabet Game and the Salad Bowl Game to reinforce school concepts and quick thinking skills as kids get a little older.
- Engage teens and tweens in higher-level "brain games" like Fictionary and Higglety Pigglety to stretch their vocabularies and creative thinking skills.

Get happy

- Share family recipes and the stories behind them -- research shows that kids who know their family stories are more resilient than their peers.
- Play games like 2 Minute Interview, or choose more in-depth questions from our interview archives, to get to know one another better.
- Engage the whole family in deeper discussions using topics from our Conversation of the Week or Challenging Conversations sections.
- Build each other up with activities like Origami Love Notes and 20 Things I Love About....
- Laugh together! For little ones, silly games like Cat and Cow will bring on non-stop giggles. Older kids might enjoy tongue twisters, a family Joke Jar or a game of Would You Rather...?

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE DONNER FAMILY

Meet the Donner family! Hailing from Nebraska, this family of five has been working on some familiar struggles: picky eating, nutrition and division of responsibilities. We are pleased to be able to share their experiences and great tips with other families!

The Family:

Josh and Jacqui Donner, of Lincoln, Nebraska, and their three kids: Aedyn (12), Zoe (9) and Michael (6).

The Goal:

Currently, the Donners are working on getting the kids to accept more new foods, especially vegetables. In fact, that's how they found The Family Dinner Project — Jacqui says “I was probably Googling for ideas on how to get kids to eat what we're having instead of making a separate meal.”

The Challenges:

Like many parents we've worked with over the years, Josh and Jacqui have encountered negotiating from their kids over what's being served. “They only want pizza, Kraft mac and cheese or grilled cheese,” Jacqui shares. Getting Aedyn, Zoe and Michael to eat what their parents prepare instead of asking for a preferred meal has been a struggle.

The Strategies:

The Donners have implemented some rules at dinnertime that have helped not only with their kids' eating habits, but also with everyone's participation in family dinners in general.

“We have a new rule that one meal is served. If they don't like it, they have to make their own replacement. That could be cereal, a sandwich, making a salad if they don't want the green beans...Everyone must try the new food or new preparation of a food they haven't liked in the past.”

In addition to switching gears from short-order

cooks to presenting one desirable meal, the family has a smart division of responsibilities to help make dinnertime a shared effort. Jacqui says, “We have three helper positions and they rotate weekly. One person helps prep (set the table, get everyone drinks, let everyone know dinner is ready). One person helps plan (gets to choose a meal or side dish, goes to the grocery store to pick out fruits, cereal and vegetables). One person is on clean-up crew (makes sure any trash, like napkins, go in the trash, dishes make it to the dishwasher, leftovers to the fridge and dining table is wiped down).” Keeping everyone involved in dinnertime duties is a great way to ensure that the whole family is invested in the experience, and the responsibility of planning, shopping, cooking and cleaning doesn't fall to one or two members of the household!

The Food:

Despite the kids' preferences for mac and cheese or pizza, and their parents' desires for them to try more vegetables, the Donners can all agree on Shrimp Pesto Pasta as a favorite meal!

The Takeaway:

As they continue to work on improving eating habits and broadening horizons, Jacqui says that remembering to focus on fun and conversation at the table, with ideas she's learned from The Family Dinner Project, has been helpful. “Having ideas for things to talk about...makes dinner fun and less stressful when they're upset about what we're eating. I feel like we've gotten to know our kids better and they've become more open to giving their honest opinions about some dishes we've tried.”

The Best Part:

The Donner kids are enthusiastic about their family dinner experiences. Aedyn, Zoe and Michael say that eating with everyone at the table and talking about their days is the best, especially when they can share something funny that happened at school!



Our friends at Recipe for Success shared this idea for a fun and family-friendly meal with us. They note that the “pancakes” — which are really more like flatbreads — can be used to make pizzas or served with dipping sauces. We suggest setting out a variety of cheeses, veggies and toppings and letting everyone in your family make their own flatbread creation!



Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup seasonal green leafy vegetables (kale, collard greens, spinach)
- 1 1/2 tablespoon sesame oil
- cooking spray
- 1 lb. flatbread or pizza dough
- Toppings of your choice: Cheeses, roasted vegetables, pizza sauce...be creative!

Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 200°F.
2. Roll out the dough and divide it into 6 portions. Cover with plastic wrap.
3. Finely dice the green leafy vegetables and divide the vegetables into 6 equal portions.
4. Sprinkle a clean flat surface with flour. Place one piece of dough on the floured surface. Using a rolling pin, flatten one of the balls of dough into a circle about 7 inches across.
5. Brush ¼ teaspoon sesame oil onto the round of dough. Sprinkle a pinch of salt onto the round of dough, then spread the oil and salt around with your fingers to completely coat the round.
6. Sprinkle one portion of the vegetables onto the round. Lightly press the vegetables into the dough with your fingers.
7. Fold the round in half and then fold in half again. Roll into a ball with your hands.
8. Sprinkle the dough ball with a little flour. Flatten it with your hand and roll it out again into a circle about 5 inches in diameter.
9. Repeat with the remaining 5 dough balls.
10. Flip the pancake over with a spatula or pancake turner. Cook the other side for about 4 more minutes or until the bottom is browned.
11. Remove your pancake to a baking sheet. Place the baking sheet into the preheated oven to keep it warm while you cook the remaining dough circles.
12. Top with cheeses, vegetables, or other desired toppings and serve with your favorite dressing or dipping sauce!



GROCERY SCAVENGER HUNT

Looking to spice up your trips to the grocery store with the kids? This scavenger hunt game should do the trick! Our list includes challenges such as ‘Find a cheese that came from a foreign country’ and ‘Find one item in the produce section that came from the state where you live.’ If you’re feeling creative, add some new challenges to the list. Not only is this game fun, but it’s educational too!

Contributed by Jono.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/grocery-scamenger-hunt/>



TALK ABOUT: SHARED MEALS

Use these conversation starters around the dinner table:

If you could learn to cook anything, what would it be?

Are there certain foods we eat that bring up memories for you? Share.

Besides the food, what are some things about eating with family or friends that you enjoy?

If you could invite anyone from history over for dinner, who would it be? What would you serve? What questions would you want to ask them?

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Grocery Store Scavenger Hunt

Directions

Print a copy of the scavenger hunt for each child and give each a pen or pencil. Give everyone a set amount of time to search and decide on a place to meet once the search is done. Young kids can team up with an adult or pair with older siblings.



Grocery Store Scavenger Hunt

Your Name:



1 Find a fruit or vegetable for each color of the rainbow:

-  Red
-  Orange
-  Yellow
-  Green
-  Blue
-  Indigo
-  Violet

2 Find one item in the produce section that came from the state where you live:



3 Find a cheese that came from a foreign country:



4 Find a food you've never tried before: ?



5 Find something that's on sale this week:



6 Find a package that has a recipe on it:



7 What is the recommended serving size of pasta?



8 Compare the prices between a name brand box of cereal (like Kelloggs, General Mills etc.) and the store brand. Which is cheaper?



Q RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

Talk About: Shared Meals



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If you could invite any person from history to dinner, who would it be? What would you serve? What questions would you want to ask them?

