

Growing with the Seasons at Family Dinner



Food

Make eating more plants fun and easy with a Do It Yourself Salad bar for dinner!



Fun

Encourage exploration of new fruits and vegetables with the Mystery Foods activity.



Conversation

Earth Day is coming up! Talk about it at your table with these conversation starters.



The Family Dinner Project is based in Massachusetts, and by this time of the year, we're all eager for a change of season. As New England hangs onto the last bits of winter, we can't help but think of Spring, warmth, fresh fruits and vegetables and lots of new growth all around us.

This is a perfect time to focus on growth at the family dinner table, too: As the seasons change, we can all take the opportunity to refresh our outlook and try a few new things. This month, we recommend putting a little extra attention into plant-based eating, as well as using food preparation and dinnertime as opportunities to introduce new skills. With these strategies, everyone is sure to grow this Spring!

“Eat Food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” — Michael Pollan

You've probably heard of Michael Pollan's famous quote by now, and you may have thought once or twice, This is easier said than done! Eating “mostly plants” can be tricky, especially if you've got selective eaters at home, but there's no doubt that it's good for all of us to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into our plates. Try some of these unexpected options:

- Work vegetables and herbs into dressings, sauces and even breads! Try [Fresh Corn Spoonbread](#) or [Carrot Top Pesto](#) to brighten up your family dinner.
- Give familiar favorites a new life with plant-based takes on classics. Let the kids help make [Baked Vegetable Quesadillas](#), [Fiesta Wraps](#) or [Black Bean Tacos](#). If you're not ready to go all-vegetable just yet, try a compromise like [Half-Veggie Burgers](#).
- Bulk up the same old boring salad with a family favorite — bread! [Classic Panzanella](#) or this [asparagus version](#) combine cubes of crusty bread with vegetables and dressing for an irresistible way to enjoy more veggies.

Grow their brains at the table

This month, we're pleased to share a brain-building tip for families with young diners from our friends at Vroom! Look for tips and advice for older age brackets in upcoming newsletters.

Plant some seeds for better communication

We can all get stuck in conversational ruts from time to time, and after a while, it's easy to think that we know everything there is to know about our loved ones. Make a conscious effort to grow in your knowledge and understanding of each other this month with a few new tactics.

- Stop asking “How Was Your Day?” Try some deeper, more specific alternatives with [these choices for adults and older teens](#), and [these suggestions for younger kids](#).
- Make learning about one another fast and fun with a [Two Minute Question Round](#).
- Give each family member a turn to host a “favorites dinner.” The host chooses their favorite foods for the menu, plays their favorite songs and games during the meal, and so on. You can even have everyone wear the host's favorite color, or ask questions like “What's your favorite animal? Favorite movie? Favorite book?”

Speaking of Growth...

...Thank you for always helping us to grow and develop in new ways! Your feedback on our annual survey will help The Family Dinner Project better understand the families we serve, and continue to improve our offerings in the future.

2017
Survey
Results

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE BUDHEGES FAMILY

Meet the Budheges family! Mom Sheri first connected with The Family Dinner Project through our shared connection to [#DeviceFreeDinner](#), an initiative of our friends at Common Sense Media. As the designer and entrepreneur behind [Crate Your Phone](#), Sheri is committed to finding ways for her family to connect face-to-face at the dinner table.

The Family:

Sheri, Ben and kids Bella (10) and Brooklyn (8), of Valencia, CA.

The Goal:

Like most families we know with school-aged kids, the Budheges family is working on finding more time in the week when they can all come to the table together for a sit-down meal. Sheri says that a big priority is “making sure that I have dinner planned. If I can’t make (dinner), then having something in the crockpot so it’s not a hassle to get dinner on the table...makes it easier to find the time to get everyone to sit down together.”

The Challenges:

Sports and extracurricular activities take a big bite out of the Budheges family schedule, so figuring out when and how dinner can happen — before tonight’s activity? Afterward? Who can be present? How much time will it take to prepare something? — can be a juggling act. In addition, like many on-the-go families, there’s a pull to be connected to electronic devices even during dinnertime, which Sheri and Ben would prefer to avoid.

The Strategies:

While meal planning and using the crockpot strategically can help even when the calendar

seems crazy, Sheri also notes the importance of finding, preserving and taking advantage of unscheduled moments. Two nights a week, the Budheges kids are unscheduled, and Sheri and Ben make a point of keeping that space open for family dinners. “We make sure to have a really good sit down family dinner on those nights at least.”

To ensure that the time together is meaningful, Sheri uses her own product — a custom-designed phone crate — to put electronics on hold. “I’m biased because it’s my product,” she admits, “but it really does remind us to put our phones in the crate so we’re not distracted during dinner!”

The Food:

Interestingly, the Budheges family’s favorite family dinner of the week has less to do with food preferences and more to do with consistency. Brooklyn and Bella look forward to Taco Tuesdays “because it’s something they can always count on.” Because Tuesday night is one of their “unscheduled” evenings to spend more time at the table, they are able to look forward to both the routine of gathering with family and knowing that tacos will be on the menu — a simple family ritual that will surely be the source of many memories.

The Takeaway:

Connecting with The Family Dinner Project has encouraged the whole family to try new dishes, while reinforcing their already strong commitment to making dinnertime a valuable part of family life as often as possible.

The Best Part:

Sheri says simply, “The conversation!” We can’t help but agree.



This endlessly customizable dinner concept is a great way to combat food waste, use up leftover odds and ends and keep the whole family happy with a healthy and totally personalized meal! Feel free to substitute any leftover cooked meats, fresh vegetables, cheeses, dressings, nuts, seeds or fruits you have in the house to make your salads interesting and nutritious.



Ingredients:

Serves 4

- 8 cups leafy salad greens, washed
- 8-12 oz. leftover cooked chicken, ham, turkey or fish, or a combination (substitute beans/lentils/tofu as desired)
- 4 oz. cheese
- 1 medium apple
- 1 bunch grapes
- 1/2 small cucumber
- 1 pint grape tomatoes or 1 large tomato
- 2 medium carrots
- 2 hard-boiled eggs (optional)
- 1/2 cup almonds or walnuts (substitute pumpkin or sunflower seeds as desired)
- Salad dressing of your choice

Instructions:

1. Pile greens into a large bowl or platter.
2. Cut meats into bite-sized pieces. Cube or shred cheeses. Arrange in small bowls or on a plate.
3. Prepare the other vegetables and fruits as needed – dice apples, slice cucumbers, cut grapes and tomatoes in half as needed, slice carrots – and place in small bowls or arrange in piles on a platter.
4. Cut hard boiled eggs in quarters and place in a small bowl.
5. Place nuts or seeds in a small bowl.
6. Set out your family's favorite salad dressings and let everyone make their own salads!



EXPLORE MYSTERY FOODS

Take your children to the supermarket and ask them to pick out a fruit or vegetable they have never seen before or never eaten at home. Incorporate this new food into a meal!

Contributed by The Family Dinner Project Team.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/explore-mystery-foods/>



TALK ABOUT: EARTH DAY APRIL 22

Use these conversation starters around the dinner table:

What's your favorite activity to do outside?

Are there ways you think our family could do a better job caring for the environment?

What are three things we might start doing regularly that are good for the earth?

Imagine you could build a whole new planet for people to live on. What would it be like? What other species would live there? How could you make sure that planet was taken care of by people and animals?

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Math Munching

At mealtime or snacktime, create math stories with your child: "Imagine you're a hungry bear and these crackers look yummy." Count them together and invite them to choose a number of crackers to eat. Then ask: "How many crackers did you eat? How many crackers are left?"

Ages 3-4

 vroom.org 



Brainy Background

powered by Mind in the Making

Having fun with math helps your child love to learn, while becoming familiar with counting, numbers, and what they stand for. They're also learning to pay attention, to hold numbers in their mind as they use this information, and to use self-control not to eat everything all at once!

For more activities like these, check out the free Vroom app!

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RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

Celebrate Earth Day April 22



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