

Falling into Family Dinner



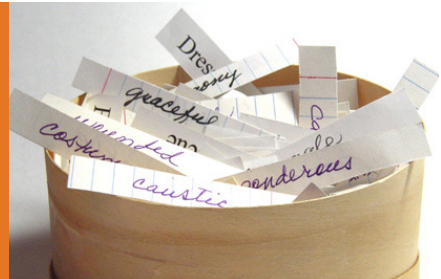
Food

This quick and healthy dinner is made almost entirely from pantry staples, and can be on the table in 30 minutes or less for a fast family meal.



Fun

Get everyone involved in adding story starters to a jar that you can keep handy for family dinner fun!



Conversation

If Back-to-School will be part of your Fall routine, try our Best Back-to-School Questions for a dinner conversation everyone will enjoy.



As the summer draws to a close, it's inevitable that most families will be gearing up for a shift in routines. While the change in seasons is most pronounced for those with school-aged children at home, there's something about Summer that tends to bring a more relaxed feeling for most of us, while Fall seems to signal a return to more disciplined schedules.

Now is the perfect time to begin planning for what daily life will look like when those schedules do return, including when and how to fit family dinner into your calendar. Here are some simple steps you can take right now to ensure that you're prepared for family dinners this fall:

1. Spend some quality time with the calendar.

Note which days of the week will typically be most challenging in terms of getting everyone together for dinner. Then ask yourself why — is it because everyone's coming and going at different times? Because having enough time to cook a meal and eat it before other obligations begin will be difficult? If you have a clear idea of what's going to complicate family dinnertimes, you will be more ready to overcome the challenges.

2. Choose (and prepare) a few quick make-ahead or last-minute meals.

Make a list: Soups, stews, chilis and casseroles are all great items that can be made on a weekend and reheated on a busy weeknight, or made now and put into the freezer for later. Sandwiches, egg dishes, wraps and fast pasta dishes with few ingredients are good ideas for last-minute meals that need to get to the table in under 30 minutes. And the occasional frozen pizza with a bagged salad won't hurt in a pinch. Buy freezer and shelf-stable items now, and make sure to add fresh ingredients for one or two "fallback" meals to your grocery list each week so you'll always be able to make dinner.

3. Plan to share the load.

Part of what complicates family dinner in many households is that the workload of planning, shopping, cooking and cleaning up all falls to one or two people. Think carefully about how you can involve everyone in some aspect of dinner — can your toddler bring napkins and unbreakable cups to the table? Can your 8-year-old be in charge of the salad, and your 12-year-old start learning the ropes of dish duty? Start making these jobs a part of the routine now, so they become a habit before hectic evenings set in.

4. Have a fun and conversation game plan.

This is a great way to get younger kids and teens involved, too. Make a basket of table-friendly card games and a jar of conversation starters so you're always ready to pull out the fun and conversation during mealtimes. Check out our ideas for more fun activities, too, and see which ones appeal to your family. The more table games you learn to play together, the more ideas you'll have to stave off boredom and negativity not just at your own dinner table, but at restaurants and in long lines, too!

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE AASER FAMILY

We're delighted to share the family dinner wisdom of Sana Aaser and her family, who have overcome significant obstacles in a creative and meaningful way!

The Family:

Sana Aaser, her husband, father-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, 2-year-old nephew and infant niece. The whole extended family lives in Maple Grove, Minnesota.

The Challenge:

When Sana's mother-in-law was diagnosed with cancer, the whole family lived together in order to help share in caretaking duties and remain close with each other during a difficult time for all. Now Sana and her husband have moved to their own home, but worry that his father will feel torn between the two households, and miss the support and extra sets of hands that were always available when the families shared a home.

The Strategies:

Fortunately for the Aasers, the two households are only 10 minutes apart, so Sana and her sister-in-law have devised a shared family dinner strategy that helps them all maintain their closeness. The two women share the cooking responsibilities and gather the whole family for dinner almost every night at one home or the other, a unique arrangement that Sana reflects has more than one advantage.

"Making it an efficient process with shared

responsibility is important, especially on busy weeknights," she says, adding that the group approach to dinner also helps the whole family work together on their shared goal of reducing their intake of meat and starches. But the Aaser family's communal dinners also have a deeper significance.

The Food:

"We love food!" Sana says. "I think the delight is in the diversity of the meals we share at family dinner." Favorites include lasagna, steaks, and South Asian biryani, but the Aasers are always looking for new healthy recipes to try.

The Takeaway:

"Understanding the value of family dinner through TFDP was both encouraging and affirming." Sana says that she and her husband are preparing for parenthood, and hope to incorporate the tips for engaging kids in family dinner as their family continues to grow.

The Best Part:

Gathering the two households each night has created a joyful family dinner experience for the Aasers. Sana says she especially loves experiencing the excitement of her niece and nephew when they see each other each day. But for all the adults in the family, "it's wonderful to have immediate counsel as things come up in life, and (because of family dinners) there is a designated time for such conversations already built into our routine."

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This recipe is from the Vermont WIC program, and appears in their [Eat Well Cookbook](#).



Pasta with Tomatoes and Chickpeas

Serves 8

Ingredients:

- 1 pound ripe, fresh tomatoes, finely chopped
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- Salt and pepper (to taste)
- 1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar (optional)
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil (or 1 teaspoon dried basil)
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1 pound whole wheat pasta (any shape), uncooked
- 1/4 cup shredded cheese (try cheddar, Monterey Jack, parmesan or feta)

Instructions:

1. Combine tomatoes, garlic, salt, pepper, balsamic vinegar, basil, and olive oil in a medium bowl. Let sit for 15 minutes.
2. Stir in chickpeas.
3. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add a generous amount of salt and the pasta. Cook al dente, until the pasta is firm to the bite. Drain.
4. Toss with pasta with chickpea sauce, sprinkle on cheese, and serve.



STORY STARTERS

Write several words on slips of paper and put them in a box. Have each person at the table choose a word from the box. These words are now your “Story Starters”- Everyone at the table has to help make up a story using all the words that were chosen!

Contributed by Bri Derosa.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/story-starters/>



TALK ABOUT: BACK TO SCHOOL

It's officially back-to-school time, and families are running down the checklists: School supplies? Check! New shoes? Check! First day photos? Check! Great dinner conversation....?

While parents definitely want details, it can be hard to get past the usual “How did it go?” types of questions. So we've compiled this Top 10 List of great conversation starters you can use to get everybody talking about back-to-school:

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/conversation-of-the-week/best-back-school-questions/>



TOP 10 BACK-TO-SCHOOL CONVERSATION STARTERS

- What's one thing you learned today that you think I might not know?
- Who are you most excited to see at school? Least excited? Why?
- If you could change one thing about school, what would it be?
- Think of a project or assignment you really enjoyed. Why did you enjoy it?
- If you could make the rules at school, what would your top 3 rules be?
- Tell me about what lunch (or recess) was like today.
- What motivates you to work hard at school? What doesn't motivate you, and how can we change it?
- If you could take a class in anything, what would it be?
- Who is the best teacher you have this year (or have ever had)? What makes them a great teacher?
- What makes you feel good about yourself when you're at school?