

MASTERING THE SPLIT SHIFT FAMILY DINNER



Food

This Chicken Santa Fe Soup from our friends at AAFCs is a perfect solution for split shift dinners.



Fun

A progressive food poem that grows as each group of family members adds their words can be a wonderful way to engage even when you're eating at different times.



Conversation

Use these printable placemats to set the table for many rounds of enjoyable conversation.

More and more, we're hearing from families that their dinners together "don't really count" because the whole group isn't able to sit down together at the same time. It's a common misconception that family dinner can only be, well, family dinner if there's not a single person missing. But with families getting busier, is it really true that we have to let go of family dinner when schedules separate us in the evenings?

Good news: Your mealtimes can still be meaningful and beneficial if big brother's at basketball practice or a parent is working an evening shift. Of course it's ideal to have every family member present at the table whenever you can, but the "split shift" family dinner can be a practical and enjoyable solution on busy evenings. Try these tips to make split shift family dinners a rewarding experience in your household!

1. No one eats alone.

We learned this household mantra from our friend Beth, a busy mom of five, and it's a great rule of thumb for getting the most out of split shift meals. Look at the schedule and see how you can create "pods" within your family unit so at least two people are sitting down together at any given time.

2. Consider courses.

If one family member will be absent while everyone else is eating dinner together, try having a healthy dessert like these [pocket fruit pies](#) ready to go for later in the evening. That way, when they return, the rest of the family can gather and everyone can share dessert.

3. Leave notes.

To help everyone feel as though they were part of a shared experience, choose a few common [conversation starters](#) to leave on the table for the evening. The first group to sit down to dinner might write down their answers or leave a recorded message for the next dinner shift, and so on.

4. Plan menus accordingly.

A freshly cooked pork chop might be wonderful for the early eaters, but consider how appealing it would be by the time the last family member sits down to dinner. Split shift meals should ideally be items that hold and/or reheat well, or things family members can build for themselves: A slow cooker full of [stew](#) or [chili](#) and a basket of rolls, a big salad with dressing on the side and a [lasagna](#), or a platter of [sandwich fixings](#) and a bowl of fruit.

5. Build in responsibility.

Split shift meals can feel overwhelming if one person has to oversee every detail. Make it clear what each person's responsibility is at their mealtime. Can a spouse or teenager take care of baking the lasagna and washing the prep dishes? Will each diner — of any age — be responsible for helping to clear the table and get dirty plates into the dishwasher after they've finished eating, so the mess doesn't pile up for the next shift? Can the last person to eat pack

up the leftovers and wash the lasagna pan? Set expectations, leave reminders and don't forget to praise efforts, even if the job isn't completed perfectly. Small steps over time add up to big results.

So if your family dinners this fall can't always include the whole family, don't stress! Make it a goal to gather everyone when you can, and when you can't, consider the split shift dinner as a "good enough" backup option.

GET MORE GREAT DINNER TIPS FROM THE NY TIMES

We're honored to be recognized by the NY Times in their wonderful comprehensive guide to family dinners!

[*How to Have Better Family Meals*](#)

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REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE DENOY FAMILY

Meet the Denoys! Kristi and "Superman" are focused on raising their two girls with the same family dinner traditions they remember from growing up.

The Family:

Kristi, Superman, Little Miss (9) and Belle (5 months). The Denoys hail from Grand Prairie, Texas.

The Family:

Building on their childhood memories and traditions, Kristi and Superman want to make sitting down at the table to enjoy a meal and a good conversation without distractions a daily routine for their daughters.

The Challenge:

Scheduling is a big problem for the Denoy family, who juggle "a LOT of extracurricular activities!" Finding a way to get everyone to the table for a meal together is a priority for Kristi and Superman, but it takes hard work and planning to make it happen.

The Strategies:

Kristi shares that prioritizing dinnertime doesn't always happen without help. On days when the family is pressed for time due to their many commitments, they enlist the help of nearby grandparents, often visiting them for dinner so that the Denoy parents don't have to devote precious minutes to cooking and cleanup. When they do have an evening free of commitments and can eat at home, they try to make the meal planning and prep as easy as possible to allow them to focus on togetherness. "We like to have 21 go-to dinners," Kristi says, reflecting a rotation of family favorites that are easy to cook and minimize fuss at the table.

The Food:

Quick and easy is the Denoy family strategy, reflected in a favorite meal: ground beef and frozen chopped broccoli, sauteed with garlic powder, onion powder, salt and pepper. "It is DELICIOUS and so easy!"

The Takeaway:

Through both The Family Dinner Project and the Kids Cook Monday, Kristi shares that she's been able to get Little Miss excited about helping in the kitchen. They've also all enjoyed trying different conversation starters and games. "Dinner talks are the best kind of chats!"

The Best Part:

Kristi and Superman love "the deeper connections that dinner conversations lend," as well as making memories at the table that their girls will cherish in years to come. As for 9-year-old Little Miss:

"I THINK THE BEST PART OF FAMILY DINNERS IS LAUGHTER. WE LIKE TO TAKE TURNS TRYING TO MAKE ONE ANOTHER SMILE WHILE WE EAT."



This recipe comes to us courtesy of our friends at AAFCS and the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. If you don't have a slow cooker, you could make this soup on the stovetop; simmer all ingredients in a large stock pot for 1 hour.



1. Invite your kids to take a bite of food. They can even close their eyes and savor it.
2. Ask ‘what does the food taste like? What is its texture? Consider its color, smell, and the memories it brings up.’
3. Have your kids say or write down the first words they think of.
4. Voila! They just wrote a poem!

This activity comes from the blog [Savoring a Meal with Poems](#) by Lisa F. Price, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/food-poetry/>



Slow Cooker Chicken Santa Fe Soup

Serves 8

Ingredients:

4 frozen boneless, skinless chicken breasts
1 (7 oz) can chopped green chiles
1 (8 oz) bag frozen corn
1 (28 oz) can diced tomatoes, no salt added
1 (15 oz) can black beans
1 (14 oz) can low sodium vegetable broth
1 (32 oz) box low sodium chicken broth
3 tablespoons low sodium chili seasoning mix

Instructions:

1. Place all ingredients in slow cooker and simmer for 6-8 hours on Low (3-4 hours on High).
2. Remove the cooked chicken and shred with two forks.
3. Return chicken to the soup and serve.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/slow-cooker-chicken-santa-fe-soup/>

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Interview

-  Talk about a time you tried something new. What was it? What happened?
-  What was your favorite tradition when you were a child? Have you passed that down to future generations? Will you?
-  Tell me your favorite story about our family. Why do you like this story in particular?
-  Do you know any stories about your grandparents when they were kids?
-  Tell me something about yourself that you think I might not know.