

New Year, New Projects, New Stories



Food

Want something quick for the New Year? Try this low-cost twist on breakfast for dinner!



Fun

Keep the storytelling going with the Story Starters game.



Conversation

Prompt a discussion about family history with this conversation starter.



Happy 2019! Wherever you are in your family dinner journey, we're happy to have you at our table.

This year will mark an exciting time for The Family Dinner Project, as we look forward to several new projects, including a book! Our collection of stories, advice, and of course lots of food, fun and conversation, is slated for publication by Familius Publishers in the fall of 2019. We owe our thanks and affection to all the families we've learned from over the years. Many of their stories are included in the book or have inspired our tried-and-true advice to families in other ways.

Speaking of stories, that's part of the great power of The Family Dinner Project — the storytelling it inspires. From gathering around your own tables at home to share stories with your families, to sharing your triumphs, challenges and experiences with us so that others can learn from you and recognize themselves in your words — family dinner inspires people to open up. Here are just a few ways telling your stories can have a positive impact on others:

- When families share their stories with one another at the table, **kids experience an increase in resiliency**. They feel more connected to their family history and are more able to bounce back after bullying and negative experiences.
- When adults tell stories that feature a positive outcome — how something good resulted from something negative or challenging — **they experience a boost in their own sense of well-being**.
- Family challenges — such as difficulties with dinnertime or feeling frustrated by poor communication at the table — can feel isolating. Reading the stories of other parents who have experienced similar difficulties is a good reminder that **you're not alone, and that there are solutions out there that have worked for other families like yours**.

Thank you for being a part of this powerful community, and keep the stories coming in 2019! To share your own family story, [contact us](#).

FAMILY OF THE MONTH

In celebration of our upcoming book, we'd like to thank the many families who have agreed to let us share their stories with a wider audience. There are too many to list, but here are three of the stories that inspired us as we worked on our upcoming manuscript.

THE WALTER FAMILY



We met Denise Walter through a professional conference. Denise is a big fan of family dinners, and shared some of her tactics with us. We were so impressed that we asked if she and her daughter would like to be featured on our site! Here Denise, a single mother of a teenage daughter, gives us a glimpse into family dinner in her house.

THE FAMILY:

Denise Walter and daughter Grace, 15, from Dobbs Ferry, NY.

THE GOAL:

Denise has been working on improving her family dinner preparedness.

While she says she feels it may be easier for her, as a single parent, to get her “whole family” around the table than it is for families with more members at home, she also bears the responsibility for making dinner happen despite her work schedule and Grace’s commitments. “I used to shop whenever,” she says, “buying the same staples and then ‘cooking’ whatever after standing in front of the fridge lamenting that I only had the ingredients to make steamed veggies and frozen veggie burgers.”

Determined to change her habits for her sanity and for the health of both herself and her daughter, Denise now writes a weekly meal plan and shops — “with a list!” — each weekend. It’s a new habit that she started in the New Year, and the goal is to continue planning and shopping in an organized fashion so she can continue varying meals and trying new things.

THE CHALLENGE:

Getting dinner on the table at a reasonable hour. Denise says that due to her work schedule, she often doesn’t get home until almost 7 p.m., making it difficult to cook a meal and sit down with Grace much before 7:45 p.m.

But mealtimes are crucial to the family: “Since I work full-time, it’s important to me (and her, too, I think) that we connect, especially now that she has homework that takes all evening most nights.”

Without dinnertime as a break in the day for conversation, Denise and Grace might not get a chance to spend quality time together during the week.

THE STRATEGIES:

Because their diet used to be limited to 5 or 6 basic meals that Denise would make in rotation, meal planning — often with the help of favorite recipe websites — has helped Denise and Grace to try new things and increase their consumption of vegetables. A favorite trick in the Walter household is to use a panini press — “they’re really fun!” — to make quick dinners with lots of interesting combinations. Denise says that using the panini strategy has helped introduce them both to good cheeses and breads that they might not have otherwise tried. On nights when cooking feels overwhelming, the Walters fall back on eggs or leftovers, ensuring that they can still sit down together for a meal.

To make sure that dinner is a time for bonding and staying connected to each other, Denise has found some unique strategies over the years! “My daughter has never been the chatty type,” she says, echoing a common challenge we hear from many families.

“When she was younger, I couldn’t get much out of her beyond the ‘How was school?’

‘Fine.’ type of non-conversations. So I started asking her ridiculous questions. ‘Did anyone fall off their chair today at school? Did anyone fart in class? Did anyone burst into giggles and couldn’t stop? Did anyone trip over their shoelaces today?’ Answering these yes or no questions would often lead to her response, ‘No...but this did happen....’”

In addition to the unusual conversation starters, the Walters have developed a unique nightly game ritual. “We’ve been playing a never-ending game of UNO at the table,” Denise shares. “So far, we’ve played 550 rounds!” They estimate that by the time Grace goes to college, they will have reached a goal of 1,000 rounds of UNO at the dinner table.

THE FOOD:

Denise and Grace don’t eat pork or red meat, so much of their diet revolves around vegetarian options, with some chicken and fish. Favorite dishes include vegetarian tacos, sweet potato pie, pasta with feta and walnuts and black bean burgers with sweet potato fries. Of course, panini dinners also figure heavily into the rotation! Denise says working hard on menu planning has been a pleasure because it constantly introduces them to new favorites.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Having good conversation starters is key for Denise, who values the daily “check-in” time with Grace. Whether using the silly questions she developed when her daughter was younger, or starting with something like Rose, Thorn and Bud to help them both reflect, Denise likes to have a way to “launch” the conversation at the table.

THE BEST PART:

Both Denise and Grace name their never-ending UNO games as a highlight of dinnertime; Grace says the games “make the time more fun and interesting.” They also enjoy having the chance to check in with one another and stay involved in each other’s lives. “Family dinner is a peaceful and relaxed time to eat a great meal and share about my day, as well as hear about my mom’s day,” Grace says.

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.

“I think establishing the importance of family dinner and seeing it as a tradition that builds the culture of the family is crucial. We realized how central this was for our family when we lived as a joint family during my mother-in-law’s battle with cancer. Each evening was a celebration of togetherness and gratitude for our blessings, and this is something we continue to carry with us.”

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.”

THE SWANSON FAMILY



The Swanson Family became friends of The Family Dinner Project while we were working with Beth’s group, The Moms Network of Walla Walla. Now Beth shares some of her tried-and-true strategies for making family dinners work in a large and busy household!

THE FAMILY:

Beth and Aaron Swanson and their five (yes, five!) boys: Gary, 25; Josh, 16; Casey, 14; Adam, 11; and 7-year-old Gabe. The Swansons live in Walla Walla, Washington.

THE GOAL:

In a large family with many different ages and stages going on at once, Beth says that the biggest goal for their family dinners right now is just finding ways to get all seven family members to the table at the same time, as well as provide a balanced meal that meets everyone’s nutritional needs and works around individual palates.

“With feeding 7 people, if 3 people will actually eat it, we call it a meal!”

THE CHALLENGES:

The Swansons are constantly juggling sports practices, jobs and other scheduling commitments. They also face the unique challenges of having younger kids whose dinnertime skills (like sitting for long periods of time or staying on-task with eating) may still be emerging, while older teen and adult children have preferences and schedules of their own to contend with. And of course, there are the individual preferences and appetites that come with raising five kids!

THE STRATEGIES:

Beth has become a master at working out ways to meet the needs of every member of her family, relying mainly on organization, a sense of humor and “learning to set lower standards” for what a successful family dinner looks like in the Swanson household. One non-negotiable Swanson rule is that no family member ever eats alone; if someone is later to finish their meal than others, another person will always sit with them and make sure there’s an opportunity for conversation. Similarly, if 7-year-old Gabe is too tired or not hungry enough to be interested in dinner with his parents and siblings, he is still encouraged to join them at the table for a game (Headbantz is a favorite!) or to talk for 10 minutes to instill the importance of spending time together at the table.

Still, feeding her crowd of kids (as well as friends — Beth estimates that on some weekend afternoons, there might be 10 teenagers gathered for a meal at the Swanson house) presents practical challenges. “It’s hard when you feed a flock to get Mom to the table,” she shares. To combat the problem, Beth sets out all of the food buffet-style on the kitchen counter and allows family members to serve themselves, freeing her to focus on her own meal. She also keeps the dinner table stocked with cutting boards and dishes of ready-to-grab fruits, vegetables and nuts to help fill extra-hungry family members, as well as to offer healthy choices to more selective eaters, like her younger children.

“My youngest seems to barely eat and does not eat green food...the good news is he sees the rest of the family eat a balanced meal and I consistently serve a rainbow, so i hope one day he just grabs a piece of broccoli and eats it.”

Beth also swears by having a planned menu as well as a back-up plan to keep the family’s dinners on track. She plans on Sundays and spends a few minutes each morning during the week prepping for the evening meal, which is posted in the family’s kitchen to forestall questions. On long and especially busy days, she relies on the crockpot, but says she’s “not afraid of omelets as a substitute if the day goes off course.” To be prepared for every possibility, the Swansons always keep a minimum of 3 dozen eggs on hand so they can get a quick meal on the table whenever they need to.

THE FOOD:

Beth jokes that her favorite family dinner is “whatever they’ll all eat,” but the Swanson boys have definite preferences. Favorite staples listed by the kids are steak, barbecue pulled chicken, pot roast and turkey, with vegetables like carrots, pea pods and artichokes also ranking high on the list. To keep up with teenage appetites, the Swanson family also employs a few regular tricks. Every night, Beth prepares noodles and rolls to add to whatever the family is eating for dinner, and on Sundays she bakes double batches of cookies, scones and breads, which are displayed in large glass jars on the kitchen counter. The Swanson boys know that whatever is in the jars is available for them to take anytime they need an extra snack, and Beth keeps a stash of baked goods in the freezer as well so she can replenish the jars whenever they run low.

THE TAKEAWAY:

The Swanson family says that through their exposure to The Family Dinner Project, they’ve learned the importance of relaxing and staying positive at mealtimes, as well as remembering that their time together at the table is more important than having a perfect meal — the connection matters more than the food.

THE BEST PART:

11-year-old Adam says he loves to play games and laugh with his family at dinnertime (and getting a slice of Mom’s chocolate cake for dessert doesn’t hurt, either!) Little brother Gabe likes it when they eat turkey for dinner and play his favorite game, Headbanz. But for busy mom Beth, the best part of family dinner is all about love.

“I get to see their faces and time seems to slow down for about 15 minutes. Plus, my love language is baking and cooking, so I know they’re getting love during the day.”

Do you have your own family dinner project to share with us? We’d love to hear from you and consider featuring your family!

[Contact Us.](#)



Shakshuka

Serves 4

Ingredients:

- 1 1/2 Tablespoons canola oil
- 3 medium onions, chopped
- 5 fresh tomatoes or 1-15oz can
- 2 Red peppers (sweet), chopped
- 1 hot pepper, finely chopped (optional)
- 1 cup zucchini, cut into small cubes
- 1/2 teaspoon sweet paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin, ground
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 4 eggs

Instructions:

1. Sauté the onion in oil in a 10- or 12-inch fry pan.
2. Add the vegetables, spices and sugar. Cook for about 15 minutes on low heat with the lid halfway on pan, stirring frequently.
3. Crack each egg on top of the hot tomato mixture in a separate place. Cover and continue cooking on low heat until the eggs are cooked to the desired firmness.

Recipe courtesy of [Connecticut Food Bank](#), adapted from New Haven Cooks, A Project of City Seed.



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!

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



TALK ABOUT FAMILY HISTORY



Prompt a discussion about family history with this conversation starter.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/new-year-new-projects-new-stories/>

CONVERSATION STARTER

What is the earliest story
you know about one of
your ancestors?



Scan the QR Code to Sign up for our Email Newsletter



<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/new-year-new-projects-new-stories/>