

# WHY YOU SHOULD FOOL AROUND AT DINNER



## Food

Get hands-on and use all your senses to make pretzels together -- bonus points for fooling around with new and different shapes!



## Fun

Fool around with new tastes and old favorites, and ask diners to guess the ingredient.



## Conversation

Get everyone in the mood for a fun family dinner with this conversation starter!



When a month starts with a whole day dedicated to fooling people, it feels like a good time to talk about the importance of having fun, especially at family dinner. Most of us probably have childhood (or even adulthood!) memories of being told “Stop fooling around!” or “Don’t play with your food!” at the dinner table. We may even say those same things to our own children. But it may be time to reconsider.

Did you know that researchers in Finland found that when kids were allowed to experience food with all five of their senses -- yes, including touch! -- they were more likely to choose fruits and vegetables than they were if they weren’t allowed to use all their senses to explore foods? Did you also know that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends parent-child playfulness as a good way to form stronger family connections? Both of these are good reasons to take a step back from the idea that family dinner should always be a well-mannered, serious time, and try approaching some mealtimes as playtimes instead.

Whether your dinners include toddlers, teens or just people who are young at heart, having fun together while you eat is an essential element of making mealtimes meaningful. Here are some ways to make fooling around at dinnertime a positive part of your routine:

- **Play with your food.** Whether it’s letting young children [paint with food coloring](#) and [make edible collages](#), challenging older kids to a [blindfolded smell test](#) or [ingredient race](#), or getting everyone involved in a family [Iron Chef challenge](#), making food a hands-on exploratory experience can broaden horizons and make mealtime fun.
- **Let them move.** Often, adults say things like “Stop fooling around!” to children who are having a hard time sitting still at dinner. Sitting nicely in a chair and eating with utensils might not be developmentally appropriate for some kids, especially very young children or those with ADHD, autism or other diagnoses. And even typically developing kids and teens might feel restless and fidgety after a long day of sitting and paying attention at school. Try letting kids stand at the table instead of sitting, play music during dinner and take dance breaks between bites, start dinner with a family dance party or some group yoga poses, or play table games that allow players to get up and use their bodies, like [Guess that Emotion](#) or Charades. You can also take moving during dinner to the extreme by adapting our [Walking Dessert](#) idea -- how about wrapping up tacos or sandwiches street-truck style to eat while you walk?
- **Invite laughter to the table.** Dinner doesn’t have to be serious to be meaningful. Make a family [joke jar](#), allow technology only for sharing funny memes at the table, play a round of [Cat and Cow](#) or try some tongue twisters to get the giggles going.

- **Break the routine.** Who says dinner always has to be eaten in the same place at the same time? Every once in a while, purposely dedicate your dinnertime to fooling around together. Indulge your gaming-obsessed teens and tweens by spreading out snack foods near the gaming system and asking them to show you how to play their favorites. Invite kids to join you on a picnic blanket or inside a tent for hot dogs, s'mores and outdoor activities. Wear pjs to dinner and serve dessert first, or set everyone up with popcorn, pizza and movies to enjoy together.

There are lots of benefits to eating together as a family, but one of the most enduring is the positive memories you can make when you set aside time to spend with each other and share food, fun and conversation. Adding some “fooling around” to the experience can help make those memories ones you’ll want to share for many years to come.

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## REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE STERENBERG FAMILY

*Meet the Sterenbergs, a family of five from Ohio who are prioritizing frequent family dinners filled with bad jokes and laughter! They are juggling a full plate of priorities and finding ways to make room for family dinner, the one time of day when they find they can focus on each other.*

### **The Family:**

Mary and Jon Sterenberg of Columbus, Ohio, and kids Paul (11), Luke (8), and Jillian (5).

### **The Goal:**

Despite busy schedules for all five members of the family, Mary and Jon believe in making family dinner a priority and aim to get everyone to the table five nights a week. It's a constant balancing act, but the Sterenbergs believe the effort is worth it. “So much of our day revolves around things that need to get done or places we need to go. We're nagging the kids to pick up their shoes or finish their homework, and we're missing the opportunity to really talk to them about their day or how they're feeling. Dinner slows things down for a little bit and lets us focus on each other. It's a refueling point in more ways than one,” Mary says.





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### The Challenges:

The Sterenberg family, like many of the families we've met over the years, finds that time is the biggest challenge in building a dinner routine. One constant struggle is the family's ever-changing schedule. With three school-aged kids in sports and activities, the days and times on which various family members might have commitments changes by season. That means disruption to not only dinnertime, but meal prep time as well. Mary and Jon find it frustrating to have to constantly change the family routines to fall in line with the different sports practices and commitments that come up throughout the year.

### The Strategies:

Fortunately, Mary and Jon have come up

with several different ways to help them manage the hectic pace of life while still adhering to their family dinner goals. First, they've looked at the family schedule itself. The Sterenberg kids are limited to choosing one sport or activity per season, which helps keep the calendar more manageable — but as Mary points out, since some sports and activities require multiple practices or meetings per week for a single child, just keeping the activity schedule limited doesn't entirely solve the family dinner dilemma. To help them manage despite the kids' busy lives, the Sterenbergs credit carpooling and flexibility with making dinner doable. "The nights I don't have to drive give me time to make the dinner and be ready when everyone walks in the door," Mary says, adding that dinnertime in their home is whatever time all five family members can gather. Many nights, dinnertime might not be until 7 p.m., as the last child is being dropped off by a carpool friend, but being flexible about the timing of the evening meal and working it around everyone's schedules has meant that dinner stays on the calendar more often than not.

Meal planning and being honest about the amount of time they'll have to devote to cooking or food prep on a certain day has also been a big factor in helping the Sterenbergs establish their family dinners. Mary says they never meal plan without having the week's schedule laid

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out in front of them, and try to account for their work schedules, the kids' needs and carpool duties when making their plans. On nights when the kids will be driven by others, Mary and Jon might plan a meal that takes a bit more hands-on time, while on nights when they're the drivers, the Sterenbergs plan to have leftovers or a slow cooker meal available. And planning for the unexpected helps, too: Mary slips a list into her planner at the beginning of the week, with all the meals she can quickly make using ingredients that are already on hand. She also makes sure to keep the ingredients for two fast "fallback" dinners in the house at all times. That way, if things don't go according to plan some evening and the Sterenbergs aren't able to make one of their planned meals, there's a list of fast and easy options ready to go to help keep them on track.

When they're able, Mary and Jon also like to try to get the kids involved in the cooking process. "We don't always have the time or energy, but I really love what happens when we work together," Mary says. "Complaints about what we're having go down, the kids feel really proud of themselves, and we end up with good conversation while we're working in the kitchen. Plus, I'm raising these kids to be productive adults — which includes cooking healthy meals that taste good!"

### The Food:

All five Sterenbergs love tacos, which

Mary says show up on the dinner table in a variety of forms — taco salad and taco tater tot casserole are two variations that get a big thumbs-up from the whole family. The kids also love breakfast for dinner and pork chops with applesauce.

As a busy parent who also writes a blog for working mothers, Mary believes in the importance of sharing the benefits of family dinners with other parents. "I know what it means to my family, and I had seen some research in passing that supported my personal experience...The Family Dinner Project offers an amazing blend of solid facts and helpful resources for my family and the working moms who read my blog."

### The Best Part:

"Stories and information always seem to come out at dinner that never surface at other times of day, even when I ask how the day went or what they did at school," Mary says, adding that the family dinner table is a constant source of bad jokes and laughter. 11-year-old Paul adds that he likes to eat dinner with the family because it gives everyone at the table a chance to share their own stories.

*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.](#)*



*This recipe is adapted from the book, Home for Dinner: Mixing Food, Fun, and Conversation for Healthier Families and Happier Kids, by Dr. Anne Fishel.*

Doughs of many kinds can be plied and twisted into recognizable shapes, and it's fun for kids to get their hands goopy and sticky. While bread usually requires patience to wait for rising pretzels provide much quicker gratification. As an extra bonus, when hot out of the oven they evoke the pretzels sold from pushcarts in New York City's Central Park. In your own kitchen, your kids can go wild molding the dough into different shapes.



## Pretzels

### Instructions:

1. Pour the warm water into a large mixing bowl. Sprinkle on the yeast and stir.
2. Add table salt, sugar, and flour.
3. Mix and knead the dough.
4. Give each child a small ball of dough to roll and twist into letters, numbers, animals or shapes without names. Grease a cookie sheet and place the pretzels on the sheet.
5. Brush the pretzels with the beaten egg (to which you've added a little water to thin it out) and sprinkle with Kosher salt.
6. Bake at 425 degrees for 12-15 minutes.
7. Let cool a little bit before you plunge into these hot doughy delights.

### Ingredients:

- 1 package yeast
- 1 and 1/2 cup warm water
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 4 cups flour
- 1 beaten egg
- Kosher salt for sprinkling

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/pretzels/>





## GUESS THE INGREDIENT

*This idea is adapted from Dr. Anne Fishel's book, Home for Dinner: Mixing Food, Fun, and Conversation for Healthier Families and Happier Kids.*

Ask your diners to guess the ingredients in a new dish. Throw in an offbeat spice or flavor element into a meal with a dash of cinnamon, a splash of lime juice or a squirt of fish sauce. And don't be surprised if children are better at this game than the adults, since we lose half of our taste buds by age 20!

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/guess-ingredient/>

