

# USING FAMILY DINNER TO DEVELOP GRIT



## Food

If all this talk of grit has inspired you to get the kids cooking this month, try this easy recipe for Spinach and Feta Pizza-dillas.



## Fun

Try the Concentration ABC game for an exercise in perseverance that's fun for the whole family!



## Conversation

Encourage kids to explore grit and growth mindset with these conversation starters.



Ask most parents and educators these days what qualities they're interested in helping kids to develop, and many of them will place "grit" somewhere in the top five. "Grit" has become a common shorthand for a whole list of positive character attributes and soft skills that can help kids (and adults) ultimately become more successful in the long run. Perseverance, resilience, and growth mindset — having the attitude that failures and setbacks are all part of a longer process of learning — are some of the ways in which grit expresses itself. But what does it all mean in practice? And how can you help your kids become more...gritty?

Think of a child who tries out for the soccer team and doesn't make it. Some kids would hang up their cleats and decide they're never playing soccer again. Others might get out into the backyard a few days later and practice their shots, determined to try again next season. In essence, that's the difference between a kid who's got grit and one who doesn't: The child with grit is able to view failure as a learning experience, and then apply that learning and make a plan to try again. If you think about how that same child might approach other obstacles and setbacks as he grows older, it's easy to see why parents and teachers want kids to develop more grit. Determination, perseverance and a can-do attitude are bound to work in anyone's favor over time.

Still, there are plenty of factors that determine whether someone develops grit or not. Some of them have to do with personality; there are certainly people who are born with greater caution about risk-taking, a lower tolerance for frustration or weaker problem-solving skills, all of which can make it tougher to learn perseverance. Other factors might include the environments in which people are raised, or the ways the people around them react to setbacks. That's where parents come in: It's possible to develop grit in your kids through everyday experiences, like family dinner, if you know how to set the example. Here are some ideas to help you bring grit into your family dinner routines:

- Let kids take on increasingly challenging tasks at dinnertime. Team member Bri shares her own story about [a dinner disaster that taught her kids some valuable lessons](#), along with suggestions to try in your own home.
- Talk about failures, setbacks and disappointments. It's good for kids to hear adults sharing their own failures and learning experiences, and it's good for adults to share them -- everyone can gain a little perspective from thinking about how
- difficult experiences provide opportunities to learn and grow. You don't have to start with the big stuff, either. Just acknowledging small mistakes ("Oops! I forgot to stop at the store on the way home!") and modeling how to overcome them with a positive attitude can get kids started on developing a growth mindset.

- Play table games that provide opportunities to “fail safely.” Bring a favorite game to the table and make sure not to let the youngest win this time. Try a silly physical challenge, like eating while balancing (paper) plates on your heads. Or work as a team to play the [Concentration ABC game](#), which is almost impossible to win but fun to keep trying!

Whatever you do to help your family develop more grit, it’s important to keep in mind that patience and positivity are key. No one learns to take bigger risks and keep trying if they’re worried about being scolded or teased when they fail. So keep the small stuff in perspective: The next time your kid tries to pour the milk and spills it everywhere, take a deep breath, show her how to clean it up, and praise her for trying. Your reaction will teach her how to overcome her mistake and make it all the more likely she’ll try harder next time. Remember, it’s no use crying over spilled milk!

## **JOIN THE FAMILY DINNER PROJECT AND AMERICAN GIRL IN CELEBRATING THE GIRL OF THE YEAR**

We’re pleased to announce that The Family Dinner Project is working with American Girl to inspire families to have more frequent, meaningful meals through special events at select American Girl stores! The 2019 Girl of the Year character is Blaire, a young girl who loves to connect with others through her creativity and especially values time spent with her family. Through overcoming food allergies and tackling a big project that could turn into a disaster, Blaire shows plenty of grit of her own -- all while demonstrating the importance of family mealtimes. Learn more about Blaire’s Family Dinner Series in-store events on the [American Girl website](#) under your local store’s events page, or check out the list of dates below.

[Blaire’s Family Dinner Series](#)

*Scan the QR Code to Sign up for our Email Newsletter*



<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/using-family-dinner-develop-grit/>

## REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE TRIP FAMILY

*We're pleased to introduce the Trip Family, fans of The Family Dinner Project from The Netherlands. The Trips have been working on ways to get the whole family involved in making dinner happen at their house!*



### **The Family:**

Val and her husband are raising three children — 12-year-old Will, 9-year-old Alex and 6-year-old Lucy — in The Netherlands.

### **The Goal:**

Currently, the Trips are enjoying their family dinners together, but would like to work on helping all the children to stay seated until the meal is over. Like many children, Will, Alex and Lucy are eager to eat quickly and then rush off to play or do other things that interest them, but their parents want to be sure that

everyone remains at the table to enjoy family time together.

### **The Challenges:**

Staying present for dinnertime and family bonding isn't just a challenge for very young children. As is the case for many families, the Trip family is working on balancing the influence of screen time in their household. Recently, the family had their weekly screen-free day, and 9-year-old Alex struggled to find ways to fill his time. He ended up in the kitchen and decided to try to make an ambitious dish: Tiramisu! Val says that after the first attempt, Alex returned to the kitchen every week during screen-free time to continue working on his skills, and eventually mastered the dessert well enough to serve it to his family at dinner that night.

### **The Strategies:**

Letting the children take ownership of different elements of dinner has become a key theme for the Trip family. Over the summer, they rented a vacation house for a week and, as Val puts it, "I did not want to be the one stuck with all the cooking!" So the family decided to give each member an assigned evening to handle dinnertime.

To get the process started and limit choices, Val bought all the main protein

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items for the vacation in advance. Then each family member chose the one they wanted to cook for their assigned dinner, along with side dishes, and made a trip to the store with a parent to buy all the things they would need to cook their meal. When it came time to cook, Val and her husband took turns supervising and helping the children with the cooking, while the other kids were in charge of setting the table and cleaning up after dinner.

The idea was such a success that the family has continued to use it in different forms even after summer vacation ended. During one recent school break, they decided to divide the week into “Girls Cook” and “Boys Cook” nights to ensure that everyone gets some time completely free from any dinner responsibilities. And the children have all started to get into the kitchen regularly to try out their baking skills. Val reports that all three love baking and will usually spend weekends baking cakes and other desserts to share.

Letting the family all take part in planning, cooking and cleanup certainly helps kids to feel more ownership of meal times, which often means they’re more willing to stay at the table. But the Trips have also started using a conversation jar during dinner to keep everyone engaged and make it more fun for the kids to

stay at the table while others finish their meals. This simple idea — a jar or basket filled with printed conversation starters to choose from — is one of The Family Dinner Project’s most often recommended ways to keep the fun and conversation flowing, and conversation jars appear on every table at our Community Dinner events. We love to see families like the Trips using them at home!

### The Food:

The Trip kids all love french fries and their mom’s special pasta with spinach. 6-year-old Lucy also enjoys curry and chose to make it for her special dish when she was in charge of cooking for the family. And of course, there’s now Alex’s carefully perfected Tiramisu...!

### The Best Part:

The whole family agrees that the best part of eating dinner together is sharing in the conversations that develop. “I am so supportive of having family dinners together,” Val says. “I am a great fan of family meals and want to spread the message!”

*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.](#)*



It's a quesadilla. It's a pizza. It's a...pizza-dilla! This quick dish is a good meatless meal and also great for building kids' kitchen skills as they grow. If you aren't fans of feta cheese, you can leave it out and add more mozzarella, but we like the salty, tangy flavor the feta cheese adds.

### **Spinach and Feta Cheese Pizza-dilla**

Makes 4 (6 in) quesadillas

#### **Ingredients:**

1 package (10 ounces) frozen chopped spinach, thawed

1/4 cup diced onion

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for greasing the skillet as needed

3/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon ground pepper

8 (6-inch) flour tortillas

1/2 cup marinara sauce

1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese

1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese

#### **Instructions:**

1. Place the thawed spinach in a clean, lint-free towel or layers of paper towels and squeeze it dry over the sink or a large bowl. Get as much liquid out as you can so your pizza-dillas don't get soggy.

2. In a large skillet over medium heat, warm 2 tablespoons of olive oil and saute the onion and garlic just until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the spinach, stir well, and cook for 2-3 minutes to warm the spinach through.

Sprinkle with salt and pepper, stir, and transfer the spinach mixture to a bowl.

3. Wipe out the skillet, add a light coating of olive oil (just a drizzle to ensure your tortillas don't stick – you can omit this if you are confident in your skillet!) and lay a tortilla into the pan.

4. Spread 2 tablespoons of marinara sauce over the tortilla, then sprinkle with 1/4 cup of mozzarella cheese and a quarter of the spinach mixture. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of crumbled feta cheese and top with another tortilla, pressing down lightly.

5. Cook the quesadilla until golden brown and crisp underneath, about 3-5 minutes. Carefully flip to the second side and continue to cook until the mozzarella cheese is melted and the second side of the quesadilla is crisp. Remove the quesadilla to a rack and repeat the process with the remaining ingredients to make four quesadillas.

6. Serve immediately, with additional marinara for dipping if desired.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/spinach-feta-cheese-pizza-dilla/>



## CONCENTRATION ABCS



Contributed by *[The Family Dinner Project Team](#)*.

This game is so challenging, it can feel nearly impossible to win — but it can also be a lot of fun to keep trying! Teamwork games like this one that provide consistent opportunities to “fail” together are a great way to build persistence and growth mindset in a lighthearted way.

To play Concentration ABCs, everyone at the table closes their eyes and goes silent for a moment. Then, without any pre-planning at all, one person begins by saying “A.” The goal is to get through the whole alphabet from A to Z with every person participating, and without breaking these rules:

- No letter can be spoken by more than one person. If two or more people say the next letter in the sequence at the same time, the game is lost and you have to go back to the beginning of the alphabet.
- No sneaky “ordering” — it’s tempting to just go around the table to take turns, but that takes the suspense out of the game!
- No person can say more than one letter in a row.

You’d be surprised how difficult it can be to make it all the way to Z! The good news is that you don’t have to get there in the space of one dinner. You can always keep track of what your personal family “best” is, and make it a goal to get past that letter the next time you play.

*<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/concentration-abc/>*



# RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

## TALK ABOUT: GRIT AND GROWTH MINDSET



**What is something you're good at doing that took a lot of hard work and practice?**

**What's one way you think you "failed" today? What did you learn from the experience?**

**What's one thing you thought you would never learn, but you eventually mastered? How did it feel when you finally learned it?**

**Is there anything you are struggling with right now? What are some ideas you can try to help yourself improve? How can we help you keep trying?**