

Family Dinner on the Road



Food

Caprese Sandwiches are a quick meal that's perfect for car picnics, or for a fun throw-together meal.



Fun

A classic game of "I Spy" is adaptable to any situation, from road trips to restaurants.



Conversation

Imagine the places you'll go with this month's conversation starter!



We usually tell families to try to keep dinner on the calendar even during the unstructured months of summer. But what happens when you're not going to be home for dinner, or home at all? Vacations, "staycations," day trips and unpredictable last-minute plans can all make family meals difficult to schedule. And for some families, summer sports and jobs mean that the pace of life becomes more busy from June through August, not less. What happens to family dinner when you're living life on the road?

Fortunately, the benefits of food, fun and conversation can be a part of your family life no matter where and when they happen. Nobody said dinner is only worthwhile if it happens around a dining room table at 6 p.m.! Here are our top tips for fitting in some family dinner fun when you're out and about this summer.

- **Bring back the car picnic.** We're not trying to be unrealistic about "the good old days," but it does seem as though older generations have more memories of packing up picnics for long car trips than younger folks do. (Maybe the rise of the drive-thru has something to do with that!) Getting the whole family involved in choosing and packing healthy, portable foods in a cooler can give a little extra excitement to a dinner eaten during a long drive. Hand out the sandwiches, play a road trip game or two, and toss out a few conversation starters while you're cruising. Or find a decent place to pull over and spread out a blanket, making for a memorable roadside family dinner.
- **Remember that restaurant meals count.** We generally encourage families to cook at home if at all possible, because the long-term health and nutritional benefits of homemade meals (not to mention the cost savings) are worth keeping in mind. But restaurant meals, take-out, room service or whatever other option you might turn to on vacation can be just as much a "family dinner" as a roast chicken you made at home. In fact, there can be some upsides to moving your family meals to a restaurant setting. When you're not worried about cooking and cleanup, you may find that everyone is more relaxed and ready to focus on the fun and conversation. And table games and conversation starters can be a great way to distract tired, hungry kids while they wait for the food to arrive.
- **Let a "real meal" slide every once in a while.** Unless there are medical concerns at play, a few dinners that aren't totally healthy and balanced won't hurt anyone. That's a good thing to keep in mind when you're faced with the option of staying just a little longer at the park instead of heading home for a meal, or when you find yourselves losing track of time on an outing and missing the dinner hour completely.

Every so often, it's okay to make "dinner" a stop at the ice cream parlor on the way home from the beach, or to dish out something quick like cereal and fruit to your worn-out family between a day of adventure and hitting the hay. The father of one of our team members fondly recalls summertime dinners of "crackers and milk" when he'd show up at home sometime between baseball practice and the streetlights coming on. (The important part of that story? His mother always made sure to sit with him and talk about his day while he ate.)

The point is, dinner doesn't have to be perfect — or even "dinner" — to be meaningful. Keeping family time on the calendar is important, but so is learning to go with the flow and make the most of whatever mealtime opportunities feel right to you.

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE "SUPER TUESDAY" FRIENDS

We're delighted to introduce a different kind of family dinner: A regular neighborhood dinner where "framilies" (families, who are friends, who have made themselves into one big extended family!) get together for shared meals.



THE FAMILIES:

Nancy, Sat and Caleb Deol (Caleb is 5)
Karen Lessard (affectionately known as Auntie KK)

Erica and Robbieo Livingstone and Syla (almost 5) and Lexa (almost 3)
Nikalette, Lee, Lorelei (4) and Baby (on the way!) Rodgers

The families live in Manchester, New Hampshire.

THE GOAL:

The "Super Tuesday" families get together regularly to share meals, with the goal of building community for themselves and their children, as well as making sure that busy families with young children keep shared meals in their hectic schedules.

Nancy: Even when our summer schedules become more and more hectic, I want to make sure that we are able to sit down for dinner together a few times a week with our neighbors.

It really does take a village and it's important that our kids grow up eating together, around a table, making memories.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/real-family-dinner-projects-the-super-tuesday-friends/>

And they are so fun to watch when they are having dinner together.

THE CHALLENGE:

The Deols and their neighbors all share that getting the kids to settle down and eat, rather than playing and chatting and getting out of their seats, is a big challenge at this stage. Making sure that all the kids eat their meals is especially important because the families want to get them to bed at a reasonable hour so everyone is rested for the next day, so they have to ensure that “Super Tuesdays” are fun and meaningful — but also stay on schedule!

THE STRATEGIES:

To ensure that the little ones eat, “the tiny humans break bread first, and the parents eat afterwards.” The group of adults interacts with the kids and helps to supervise the meal, ensuring that everyone bonds and the kids remember to stay at the table and eat. Then the kids can run off to play while the adults relax with their own meals. (We think it’s important to note that the kids and adults are still interacting, not having totally separate experiences!)

Erica shares that the regular neighborhood dinners are an important part of keeping family dinners on the schedule for her family. “Once you skip a few times,” she says, “it’s really easy to slide into weeks or months without seeing each other....the more you don’t (eat as a family), the easier it is to rush or to eat alone.”

Nancy adds that while the families usually get together on Tuesdays, the routine has become so meaningful to all of them that they frequently add other days of the week, sometimes gathering 3-4 nights at someone’s home. Depending on schedules and commitments, the families sometimes make a potluck-style dinner, or sometimes one family will cook and host for all. Everyone takes turns and contributes, and menus can be simple (hot dogs, burgers, grilled vegetables and strawberry shortcake) or more adventurous (crawfish boils, after-Thanksgiving turkey dinners, taco buffets with homemade salsas, guacamole and a variety of toppings).

THE FOOD:

A favorite potluck-style meal combines a main dish from the Livingstones (“Robbieo’s cheese-stuffed, bacon-wrapped meatloaf!”) with a side by the Deols (“Nancy’s asparagus”) and a dessert by Auntie KK (“KK’s pistachio cake!”).

THE BEST PART:

KK: “Amazing friends, great food, and it’s always an awesome time!”

Nikalette: “The best thing about Super Tuesday for me is that we have the opportunity to have our friends together with the kids and they’ve been able to establish early friendships. I also really like introducing new foods to them, and to us, as well.”

Nancy: “What we love about Super Tuesday neighborhood dinners is that they bring us all together and strengthen our friendships and community, as well as make memories with our children that they will cherish.”



CAPRESE SANDWICH



Caprese Sandwich

Serves 4

Ingredients:

- Good French bread
- Pesto, either homemade or from a jar
- Ripe tomato, sliced
- Fresh mozzarella, sliced
- Fresh basil, stems removed
- Prosciutto or good sliced ham

Instructions:

1. Cut the bread into four or five inch lengths, then slice each piece horizontally.
2. Spread about a tablespoon of pesto on one side of the bread.
3. Layer as follows: tomato, mozzarella, a whole leaf or two of basil and prosciutto.
4. Top with the other half of the bread, and serve.

This recipe comes to us from FDP's own Chef Robin.



Start with one person choosing an object, and saying “I spy with my little eye, something...” and then describing the thing. For example, “I spy with my little eye, something... purple!” The other diners have to guess what the person is looking at.

https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun_content/i-spy/



Imagine the places you’ll go with this fun conversation starter!

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