

Family Dinner in an Empty Nest



Food

This recipe for Black Bean Soup is a good one for novice cooks. And you can send the ingredients by mail!



Fun

Try keeping the family dinner fun going with a long-distance Cook Along Challenge!



Conversation

Ask these questions to help redefine your empty nest family dinners.



As the summer winds down, many families are thinking about back-to-school time. But at a certain point in parenting, “back-to-school” season becomes something new: Empty nest season. Older kids head off to college or move out into their own apartments and homes, leaving empty seats at the family dinner table. It’s easy to assume that once the kids have left home, family dinner is no longer an important ritual. In fact, sharing meals with loved ones can be just as important as ever — and maybe even more vital to staying connected and caring for our social and emotional well-being.

“Family dinner” doesn’t have to just mean parents and kids eating together; it can mean eating with anyone who feels like family. As kids grow up and head out on their own, family dinner might become two parents eating together at home, or a single parent who makes a standing dinner date with good friends. It might mean creating a tight-knit group of friends at college or in a new city with neighbors who get together regularly, or carving out Friday nights to eat with a roommate. No matter how you redefine “family dinners” in this new phase of life, you can still use food, fun and conversation as a way to connect with others. And if you want to keep the family dinner experience alive and well even across the miles, here are some suggestions for creating new habits and traditions.

- **Make decisions about what dinner will look like in your household.** Dr. Anne Fishel has [*great advice for families navigating the sudden silence of an empty nest*](#), and how to take a step back to decide what the new dinnertime normal might be for you.
- **Try setting up “family dinners”.** Chances are, there are other families in your community who are dealing with similar changes. Try gathering a group of friends who are also new empty-nesters for a weekly or monthly “family” meal.
- **Set up the kids for dinner success.** After feeding them for 18+ years, one of the questions parents often can’t seem to stop asking when the kids leave home is “Have you eaten? What did you eat?” Try sending “family dinner care packages” with items like favorite simple recipes, various [*good-quality pantry staples*](#), or the (shelf-stable) ingredients for some favorite meals. You could even look into surprising your young adult with a grocery delivery of healthy staples that you know they’ll enjoy.

- **Use technology to bring you closer together.** Screens at dinner are often distracting, but in this case, they can serve a wonderful purpose. Use programs like Skype or Facetime to set up the occasional “dinner date” with an absent child, so you can still enjoy food, fun and conversation together. However, it’s a good idea to follow your kids’ lead on this; some may need more time and space than others and balk at the idea, while others might be more homesick if you introduce a remote family dinner too soon after the transition. Give everyone a while to adjust to the new normal before proposing a tech-assisted get-together, and be sensitive to your young adult’s cues.

Adjusting to life without kids at home can be a big challenge, but take heart — those empty seats at the dinner table mean that you’ve done a good job raising independent adults who are ready to tackle new challenges. And don’t worry; chances are that holiday dinners, school breaks and other unexpected opportunities to sit down together face-to-face will be filling your calendar before you know it.

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE BURROUGHS

Two families who have weathered the “empty nest” transition are the Burroughs family from Minnesota, and the Langs from New York. Both have unique insights to share about how kids and parents can stay connected through family dinners, even when everyone is grown up and living on their own.



THE FAMILY: THE BURROUGHS

Michaelleen and Tracy Burroughs of Byron, MN. Their grown children are Brian, 23, and Regina, 21; Brian was recently married, adding Mariah to the family.

THE GOAL:

As empty-nesters, Michaelleen and Tracy have found that their family dinners have become a bit more casual — maybe too casual for their liking. When they found themselves constantly gravitating to the kitchen counter for meals rather than sitting at the table, Michaelleen noted that it was impacting the quality of their time together. “We find we take more time with each other if we are actually at the table,” she says. “Plus at the table we are further away from the computer, which sits on the kitchen counter.” They’re now trying to intentionally set the table for dinner, enticing them to sit down and make the time to connect.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/real-family-dinner-projects-the-burroughs-family/>

THE CHALLENGE:

When the kids were living at home, Michaelleen says the challenges were probably familiar to many families: Trying to work around sports schedules and other extracurricular activities to make dinner happen. Now that Brian and Regina have moved out, Michaelleen and Tracy are facing a new type of scheduling challenge: Making sure they both get home from work at a reasonable hour and still have time to make dinner for the two of them.

THE STRATEGIES:

Drawing on many years of experience with family dinners, Michaelleen and Tracy advise meal planning as one of the top ways to make sure that everyone gets together for regular meals. Planning and posting a menu each week helps to make family dinner part of the household organizational system, and can help eliminate the dreaded "What to cook" challenge at the end of a long day. Also, Michaelleen says her top piece of advice for families just starting out with dinners is to make sure to prioritize sitting down together for as many meals as possible from infancy onward, pulling the littlest ones up to the table in high chairs and boosters at breakfast, lunch and dinner so that eating together becomes a lifelong learned habit.

THE FOOD:

The Burroughs family has always relied on simple dinners that get everyone fed with a minimum of fuss. Favorites include tuna noodle casserole, a mixture of beef Rice a Roni and ground beef, crock pot meals like chili and pot roast, and pizza.

Michaelleen says they always serve a fruit, vegetable and cottage cheese as dinnertime sides — "an unusual family favorite!"

THE BEST PART:

Michaelleen says she's always appreciated the resources provided by The Family Dinner Project and enjoys providing them to patients at the Mayo Clinic to help them improve their family dinner habits. However, recently she's found new meaning in sharing our tips and tools, as son Brian and his new wife moved 900 miles away from home to pursue new job opportunities. "They send us snaps of their dinners and text with recipe requests and ideas," she says. To help the couple get settled into their new life, Michaelleen sent them links to the Family Starts With Two section of The Family Dinner Project. "I was excited to see this," she says, "because family dinner as a routine BEFORE kids makes it much more likely it will happen once kiddos enter the scene!"

FAMILY DINNER SPOTLIGHT: THE LANGS



It was a week or two before eighteen-year-old Alec was heading off to freshman year at college.

“We were in the car together,” recalls Suzanne, his mom, “when he suddenly announced that he ‘really wanted to have Thanksgiving at our house this year.’”

Turns out, Alec not only wanted it at the house, he wanted to be in charge of the event. He already had a specific menu in mind, and an agenda.

“He immediately started thinking about what everyone’s strong suits were and how they could contribute,” said his mom. “He’d say ‘this person’s good at pie’ or ‘I really like Aunt Karen’s turnips’... so that’s what she should bring.”

Perhaps the anticipation about college was getting to him, Suzanne suspected. By planning for Thanksgiving, he’d have something to look forward to in a couple of months.

And he’d stay connected in a small way to the family dinner ritual he’d grown accustomed to over the years.

“Alec has always loved to cook. Both he and his older sister Nicole were always in the kitchen with me, cooking and baking. And up until recently, we would have dinner together almost every night.”

Suzanne says she always felt it was important to spend that time together. “Especially when everyone had such busy schedules and my husband had his own business. The dinner table became a place where we could come together and reconnect each day. It was a foundation for us.”

And she recalls that her kids enjoyed coming to the table. “Everyone seemed to look forward it,” she said. “Even my son with ADHD. It was just what we did; eat dinner, read books, go to bed.”

It helped that Suzanne always came prepared for challenges, like the ‘dead silence’ scenario. “I’d ask questions about their day, but I always knew to avoid yes or no questions. And I really thought about what kinds of questions would bring things out, which meant paying close attention to what was going on in their lives.”

Another challenge that Suzanne remembers was when her daughter went through a picky stage. “She’d eat one specific food for six to eight months. For example, there was a time she would only eat pasta with red sauce. When I spoke with our doctor, he said ‘if you put what everyone else is eating in front of her, she’ll eat it.’”

While that tactic might work for some kids, it didn’t work with Nicole.

“I finally decided what does it matter if she eats the same exact food for several months? I’d rather have that than have all this tension at the table by trying to get her to eat something new. But I believe there has to be one block of time together where things are calm and people feel comfortable. And eventually, I’m happy to report, she did eat something new.”

Turns out, both of Suzanne’s children are pretty healthy and diverse eaters these days. And it appears they miss their family dinner tradition: “Alec complains about the food at school, and Nicole doesn’t like to eat alone. She’ll call if she’s sitting alone and talk with me. It’s difficult, but I really believe if you turn dinner into a relaxing ritual for everyone, it will be well worth it in the long run.”

And as for that special Thanksgiving dinner? “It turned out great. Alec even carved the turkey. And the whole experience made me feel really good—like it was his way of saying that he’s really enjoyed my cooking and being with his family. It meant a lot to me.”

Suzanne Lang works for the Poses Family Foundation (PFF) where she is the parent and partner advisor for Understood, a cutting-edge digital destination for parents of children with learning and attention issues. Prior to joining PFF, Suzanne was a program associate at the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation, leading their learning disability initiative. She also established a local support group for parents as well as an advisory board to special education in her community. Her son Alec is the inspiration behind her deep involvement in the learning and attention issues field.

If you have an interesting or inspiring family dinner story you’d like to share on our blog, let us know!



BLACK BEAN SOUP

Black beans are a great source of vegetarian protein. This easy soup can be served with a dollop of sour cream and your favorite guacamole and tortilla chips. Use a food processor to create a thick texture.



Black Bean Soup

Serves 4

Ingredients:

- 1 Tbsp. canola oil
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 Tbsp. chili powder
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 2 15-oz. cans black beans, rinsed
- 3 c. water
- 1/2 c. prepared salsa
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1 Tbsp. lime juice
- Plain yogurt or sour cream, as garnish

Instructions:

1. Heat the oil and sauté the onion until translucent.
2. Add chili powder and cumin and cook for another 2 minutes.
3. Add beans water, salsa and salt and simmer for about 10 minutes.
4. Puree everything in a food processor.
5. Serve warm with yogurt or sour cream.

This recipe was provided by Ramona Hamblin. Check out more of her recipes in her cookbook: [just cook here's how.](#)



COOK ALONG CHALLENGE

Looking for a fun way to stay connected long-distance? Try a family cook along challenge! The cook along challenge can be done live and in real time, or separately.

Here are the rules:

1. Participants agree on a recipe to cook. It can be something new, or you can choose a family recipe that one person knows and wants to teach the others.
2. The organizer sends the recipe and instructions to all participants.
3. The group agrees on a date and time. This will either be the date and time when everyone connects using a service like Facetime, or when everyone needs to send their results.
4. Each participant shops for their ingredients.

If you're cooking together: Participants get their ingredients ready and wait for the start time. Then everyone logs in to the group chat service, and cooks the dish together at the same time. The best part is being able to give help and encouragement to each other, then showing and tasting your results on camera!

If you're cooking separately: Each participant cooks and tastes the dish and takes photos and/or video of the finished product and record their reactions. By the chosen date and time, everyone shares their photos and results with the rest of the group (via whatever other method you agree on).

https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun_content/cook-along-challenge/

Ask yourself these important questions from Dr. Anne Fishel to help guide you in redefining your empty nest family dinners.



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

TALK ABOUT: NEW DINNER HABITS



Use these conversation starters to help you form a dinner routine for your empty nest

Are there foods our family didn't eat at dinner because of the kids' tastes that we now want to serve?

What topics could be discussed at dinner that weren't talked about with the kids around?

Can we change any of the division of labor around dinner - planning, shopping, prep, cooking, cleanup - now that the kids are gone?

Do we want to change where we eat in the house, or when dinner happens?

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