

TEACHING KIDS RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH FAMILY DINNER



Food

This easy recipe for chicken chili is a great first recipe for a budding family chef.



Fun

It's the perfect time of year for decorating cookies, and putting kids in charge of the task!



Conversation

Talk about the “giving” side of responsibility with these conversation starters.



One of the qualities parents say they most want to instill in their kids is responsibility. However, it seems that more and more families are struggling with how to balance the demands of tough academic loads and extracurricular schedules against the very real need to teach kids to step up and be more responsible. Colleges are adding classes in “adulthood” to their course catalogs, and everyone from middle school educators through graduate school deans are sounding the alarm over kids’ lack of basic life skills. But how do you enforce a chore chart when your teenager is putting in late nights mastering AP classes? And if you have to stand over your middle schooler to be sure expected tasks get done, is he really learning responsibility? Where’s the line between expecting kids to step up, and overloading a generation of already stressed-out young people with increasing to-do lists?

It can be overwhelming for both kids and parents to feel as though “teaching the art of adulthood” is yet another item to be checked off each day. But the good news is, with just a few tweaks to your already-established family meal routines, you can pack big lessons about responsibility into a short window of time daily. And if you don’t have a consistent family meal routine yet, starting one — even just one day a week — could be the perfect way to kick-start a responsibility practice (while also getting you all the scientifically proven benefits of family dinners). Here are some ideas to help you teach responsibility through family dinners:

- **Give everyone a job.** Every member of the family can pitch in to make mealtimes a success! Toddlers can fold napkins and carry them to the table; preschoolers can wash produce, stir ingredients and set out unbreakable dishware; elementary kids can help prepare simple dishes, pour drinks and clear the table; and so on. *Check out our info guide for more age appropriate family dinner tasks at the end of the newsletter.*
- **Put kids in charge of planning.** It’s not just the ability to do a job when asked that makes a responsible person — kids also need to build the executive functioning, or planning and organizing, skills that are needed to see something through from start to finish. By the time they’re in mid-elementary school, most kids can be in charge of noticing when a household staple they use frequently (like milk or cereal) is running low, and adding it to the grocery list. As they get older, they can be given a list of items to find at the store and bring to the cart, or asked to choose a meal for the week and make a list of all the ingredients so you’ll have what you need on hand.

By the teen years, they can not only plan a meal and prepare a shopping list, but also be in charge of cooking their chosen dinner for the family, which will teach them valuable time management and organization skills.

Use our meal planning printable at the end of the newsletter to help build kids' organizational skills.

- **Let the natural consequences play out.** One very real reason many parents feel their kids don't show much responsibility is that parents have the impulse to nag, micromanage and rescue so that tasks get done up to adult standards. Instead, try letting the whole family notice and learn from natural consequences. "Oops, dinner's ready, but nobody set the table. We aren't ready to eat yet!" will often get a reluctant or forgetful child moving more quickly than "Dinner's in 10 minutes and I've told you a dozen times already! Put down the video games and set the table!" Similarly, opening the refrigerator door and finding that there's no milk for the morning cereal will be a good motivator for your 12-year-old to add it to the shopping list next time. If parents are constantly jumping in to head off minor inconveniences like these, it's harder for kids to feel that their efforts are needed — and if they don't feel that they have an important contribution to make, they aren't likely to try very hard.

For more inspiration to help you instill responsibility through family dinner routines, check out these links:

- See how the [*Donner Family from Nebraska*](#) uses a "helper rotation" to keep everyone involved
- Learn from the [*Gonzalez Family of Washington State*](#) how their growing family divides dinner tasks
- Get Dr. Anne Fishel's Expert Advice on [*Adding Competence to the Mix with School-Aged Kids*](#)
- Learn how to [*make the most of dinner with adolescents*](#) on our Food for Thought blog

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

This Real Family Dinner Projects feature is a bit different from our others. Instead of featuring one family, we're sharing a few bits of wisdom and reality from groups of grandparents we've worked with through some of our nonprofit community programs.

For the past few years, The Family Dinner Project has partnered with Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, an organization that offers support to elders who have custody of their grandchildren for a variety of reasons. Our workshops with their support groups help bridge generational divides and give the grandparents — many of whom are managing challenges like raising grandchildren with special needs, living on fixed incomes or dealing with technology and other 21st-century child-rearing complexities for the first time — concrete strategies they can use to make mealtimes a safe haven for everyone in the household.

THE FAMILIES:

All of the quotes gathered here came from participants in our 2017-2019 Grandparents Raising Grandchildren workshops across Massachusetts.



THE GOALS:

Some common themes that came up with these groups included improving communication with their grandchildren; increasing the number of family meals they ate together during a typical week; and decreasing the amount of technology used by family members during meals. The technology goals also often included the adults in the household, who frequently had developed a TV-watching habit during mealtimes and now wanted to re-establish screen-free mealtimes with their grandchildren.

**“MY GRANDSON HAS PROBLEMS WITH
COMMUNICATION/EXPRESSION. BRINGING
HIS IPAD TO THE TABLE SOMETIMES
INITIATES A PROBLEM.”**

“I’M TRYING TO HAVE US SIT AT THE TABLE AS WE OFTEN CATCH UP ON DVR SHOWS WHILE WE EAT.”

THE CHALLENGES:

While many of the challenges the grandparents faced in achieving their dinnertime goals were the same as any family — time pressures, picky eating, technology and distraction during dinner — there were also unique situations that made these families’ meals more difficult. Many of the families in the grandparent groups had been brought together because of generational trauma and family instability that caused parents to be at least temporarily unable to care for their children. In addition, some of the grandparents found that the types of traditions, manners and behavioral expectations they grew up with have changed vastly, and that they needed to learn a whole new way of approaching mealtimes with their grandchildren.

“AS A CAREGIVER OF A CHILD WITH AUTISM, FAMILY DINNER IS STRESSFUL. I HAVE TO BE VERY CAUTIOUS OF CONVERSATION TOPICS BECAUSE SO MANY THINGS COULD BE POTENTIAL TRIGGERS FOR A MELTDOWN.”

“FAMILY DINNER AT MY HOUSE IS ROUGH BECAUSE MY GRANDKIDS HATE THE DINNER TABLE. THEY’VE EXPERIENCED A LOT OF ABUSE AT THEIR OWN DINNER TABLE. MY LITTLEST GRANDSON IS SO TERRIFIED OF THE TABLE THAT HE WON’T COME NEAR IT.”

THE STRATEGIES:

Using The Family Dinner Project’s conversation starter ideas and dinner table games has helped many of the grandparent-led families connect more easily at the table. Because there can be so many unique obstacles for these families to overcome, having ready-to-go ideas for table topics and activities helps relieve pressure and establish ways for grandparents and grandchildren to develop closer bonds during meals.

“WE USE FAMILY DINNER AS A WAY TO BUILD TRUST WITH OUR GRANDCHILDREN AND SHOW THEM WE’RE NOT JUST ‘OLD PEOPLE’.”

In addition, some of the families are using mealtimes as an opportunity to either shake up old traditions that didn’t work well for them in the past, or to bring back traditions that they want to pass along to their grandchildren.

For example, one family decided to have family breakfasts to shake off a negative association with dinnertime. Another is bringing back a fond childhood memory:

“GROWING UP, MY MOTHER HAD A RULE: ‘DON’T SAVE THE GOOD STUFF.’ WE USED THE ‘GOOD DISHES’ ANYTIME WE WANTED. IT MADE DINNER SO SPECIAL.”

THE TAKEAWAY:

Many of the grandparents involved in the workshops shared that they felt working with The Family Dinner Project reminded them of the importance of family dinners to creating a safe, loving and connected routine with their grandchildren. 100% of grandparents surveyed said they felt that their conversation habits at mealtimes would improve after the workshops.

“FAMILY DINNER IS A WAY FOR US, AS GRANDPARENTS, TO IMPART WISDOM IN A RELAXED ENVIRONMENT.”

THE BEST PART:

Most of the adults shared with us that they felt mealtimes were a way to bridge the generational divide and create bonds with their grandchildren. They enjoyed having a dedicated time set aside each day (or several times a week) when the whole family could share food, fun and especially conversation.

“THE CONVERSATION IS ALWAYS INCREDIBLE. IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT, WE ALWAYS HAVE A GOOD TIME JUST TALKING.”

Do you have your own family dinner project to share with us, or would you like to learn more about how to involve The Family Dinner Project in your community group? We’d love to hear from you! [Contact Us](#).



KATHY ELDER'S WHITE CHICKEN CHILI

This recipe was submitted to us by Kathy Elder, a teacher and family dinner advocate from Evansville, Indiana.



Kathy Elder's White Chicken Chili

Ingredients:

- 3-4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 1 package taco seasoning
- 1/2 cup water
- 1/2 jar of prepared salsa
- 2 cans tomatoes with chiles, with liquid
- 2 cans navy beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 4-6 cups of chicken broth (this depends on how thick you like your chili)
- 1 small can of green chiles with liquid
- Garlic powder, onion powder and cumin, to taste

- Salt and pepper, to taste

Instructions:

1. Place chicken breasts in a large pot with the taco seasoning, water, salsa and one can of tomatoes with chiles. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook until the chicken is cooked through (about 20 minutes).
2. Remove the chicken from the liquid, shred with two forks, and set aside.
3. Bring the liquid in the pot back to a boil and allow it to reduce for 5-10 minutes. Add the remaining ingredients, season with salt and pepper, and cook for 30-40 minutes.
4. Taste and adjust seasonings as desired. If you want a slightly thicker chili, you can remove some of the beans and mash them before adding back to the pot.
5. Stir in the reserved chicken and serve.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/food/elder-family-s-white-chicken-chili/>



COOKIE ART



Have fun decorating cookies!

All you need are some sugar cookies, icing and sprinkles! See our recipe for [easy cookies](#).



TALK ABOUT: GIVING



Responsibility isn't just about getting a job done; it's also about learning to do good things for others. Teach the "giving" side of responsibility and enjoy the spirit of the season with these conversation starters.



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

Talk About: Giving



Use these conversation starters around your dinner table

How does it make you feel to give to others?

Would you rather give, or receive a gift? Why?

What's the oddest or funniest gift you've ever received?

Who is it hardest to give to? Why?

If you could give something special to one person, who would you choose and what would you give to them?

Scan the QR Code to Sign up for our Email Newsletter



<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/teaching-kids-responsibility/>



FAMILY DINNER TASKS BY AGE

Get everyone pitching in with one or more of these age-appropriate tasks!



AGES 2-5



- Fold and carry napkins and other lightweight items
- Set out unbreakable dishware and utensils
- Wash fruits and vegetables
- Scoop and stir ingredients
- Learn to pour liquids safely and wipe spills
- Help find items at the grocery store

AGES 6-12



- Set and clear the table independently
- Rinse dishes, load and unload the dishwasher
- Learn proper use of sharp or hot kitchen tools
- Wash, dry and put away sturdy dishes and glassware
- Add items to grocery list and follow a short grocery list
- Begin to cook scrambled eggs, rice and pancakes

AGES 13-18



- Learn to cook more difficult items like soups, casseroles and pasta dishes
- Help plan family meals and manage the grocery list
- Wash pots, pans and more delicate items
- Get dinner started without adult supervision
- Learn food safety such as how to manage raw meats
- Plan, budget and execute a short grocery shopping trip

Food, Fun & Conversation

1 2 3 4 weeks to better family dinners

Meal Planner and Shopping Guide



Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

[illegible]