The Family Dinner Project

Pandemic 2020:
Virtual Dinner Party Guide

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Welcome to the Pandemic 2020 Virtual Dinner Party Guide!

In this time of Coronavirus, we're missing our friends, family and "framily" (friends who feel like family). We can't get together in person, even for a simple family dinner, with those who matter so much to us. But as the loneliness of social distancing and the anxiety of the crisis set in, getting together can feel more important than ever. So how can you manage to safely share a meal when you can't be in the same place? Here is our step-by-step guide to connecting virtually over dinner during the pandemic or any time when you can't get together in person.

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Step 1: Decide How to Connect

We recommend that you designate a host for the evening. That person should invite guests and make sure that each person is able to connect.

There are lots of virtual platforms you could choose. Here's a short list of options that we know have worked for various virtual dinner parties:

Facebook or Instagram Chat

- *Pros:*
  - Free
  - Easy to access as long as people are already Facebook or Instagram users

Facebook or Instagram Chat

- *Cons:*
  - Not accessible if guests don't have Facebook or Instagram accounts
  - Doesn't work well for groups of more than 5 or 6 people

Facetime

- *Pros:*
  - Free
  - Allows about 30 people on chat
  - High quality and fun filters
- *Cons:*
  - Only available to Apple users

Google Meet/Google Hangouts

- *Pros:*
  - Free
  - Allows up to 25 people
  - Guests only need a Google account to join
  - Allows guests to join by phone if video is not an option
- *Cons:*
  - Video feature can lag or freeze
  - Works best in Chrome browser

Skype

- *Pros:*
  - Free
  - Allows up to 25 people

Skype

- *Cons:*
  - Users have to download the Skype app and create an account to access, or use "Meet Now" with app installation if they don't have an account

Zoom

- *Pros:*
  - Easy to use
  - Good video quality and chat feature
  - Allows users to join by phone if video is not an option
  - Allows up to 100 guests and has features like "breakout rooms" that can be used with smaller groups for games or side conversations
- *Cons:*
  - Free accounts only allow up to 40 minutes of connection at a time
  - For meetups lasting longer than 40 minutes, you'll need a paid account (starting at around $15 per month)

Once you've decided on a platform, set the mood by inviting everyone with flair! Whether it's a fun email or a designed virtual invitation from an "e-invitation" service, you can get everyone excited by making your dinner announcement special.

Be sure to include these key details:

- **Event time**

- **Joining information (including links to the event, dial–in information and access codes)**

- **What to expect**

If you're playing games that will require access to a website or collecting household objects ahead of time, say so! And if you are going to be doing a cooking challenge or making specific recipes, include that information here as well.

And this is the perfect opportunity to set expectations about timing up-front. Provide a start and end time, and let guests know that if everyone is ready to sign off early, that's okay -- just as it would be okay if some people want to linger and play one last game or finish a conversation.

Step 2: Figure Out the Food

Food is an essential ingredient for a shared meal, whether in-person or virtual! When you're planning a distance dinner, you could certainly agree that each person will make their own meal. But for a truly shared experience, here are some virtual menu planning ideas you might try:

Do a show and tell.

If each person makes an individual meal, start the experience with a food "show and tell!" Let each guest show what they're eating, and share why they chose to make that particular dish. If something looks good, you might want to share links or send around an email afterward to swap recipes.

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Make a set menu.

The host could choose the menu for the virtual dinner, just like they would if you were eating at their home. The host would send the recipes to everyone ahead of time. Each person would make the recipes on their own, and show their results when you meet.

Create a theme.

Themes can be a great way to unite people around a shared food experience when they're not actually in the same room. You could choose a color, and tell guests that everyone's meal has to be red or green. Or you might give a country or region of the world. Specific dishes are good for themes, too -- Pizza Friday or Taco Tuesday -- or you could ask everyone to make a dish that represents their family heritage or culture.

You can really get imaginative with the theme if you're up to it. If everyone enjoys a certain show or movie, make that your dinner theme, with costumes to match! Suggest a literary night and make Harry Potter meals and dress in your "house colors." This idea can really add to the fun of the evening if you've got a willing group, but it's also important to know your audience before you get too attached to a big creative idea.

Let each guest choose a course.

For an even more collaborative experience, rather than the host choosing the whole meal, maybe each person could contribute a course. The host could choose a main dish, while others might share recipes for side dishes and desserts.

Take the challenge to a new level.

For a really ambitious and fun food experience, try a modified "Iron Chef" experience! Instead of sharing full recipes ahead of time, each person can choose an ingredient and send their choice to the group. Then every dinner guest has to cook a meal using the group's ingredients. Share your results when you connect for your dinner party, and you're sure to spark conversation.

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Step 3: Get Ready for Fun

Seeing your friends and family members, even on screens, could be fun enough all on its own. But it can also be difficult to communicate and interact quite as freely in the virtual world as you do in real life. Having a game or two ready can provide a way for everyone to jump in and participate in a truly memorable virtual dinner. With the current pandemic and social isolation being so stressful for many, you might want to start by checking in on how people are doing before introducing a game -- but on the other hand, a game could be the perfect distraction.

Charades

Playing Charades is perfect for online gatherings. To make it easy for players to come up with ideas, you can try using a theme, like "Book titles" or "Movies." Or you can pass around the link to an *online Charades generator*, which will suggest ideas for players to act out.

Photo caption contests

As long as you're meeting online anyway, get some inspiration from the internet! Take turns sending images that you've found online, and ask each person to submit a funny caption. Vote for your favorites or just enjoy the laughs!

Photo Caption Contest Ballot:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

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Story by sentence

This game is especially good for mixed age groups, since even young children tend to be good at coming up with stories to tell!

Have one person begin telling a story. After they've spoken a sentence, another person continues the story with their own sentence. Keep going until someone says "The End." When you're doing this online, it's important to have an order established ahead of time to avoid confusion, so assign each person a number or use another method like going in age order or geographic location (East to West? West to East?).

Write Your Story Down Here:

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Rose, thorn and bud

Each person takes a turn telling about their "roses" (things that they're grateful for or that makes them happy at the moment), "thorns" (something that's a disappointment or a difficult moment from the day), and "buds" (something they're looking forward to or hope to do).

If you get the feeling that people are really having trouble finding the bright side due to the pandemic, you might change it to "Cactus Flower" and let everyone name things that are really difficult, along with a few things they're looking forward to when the crisis has passed.
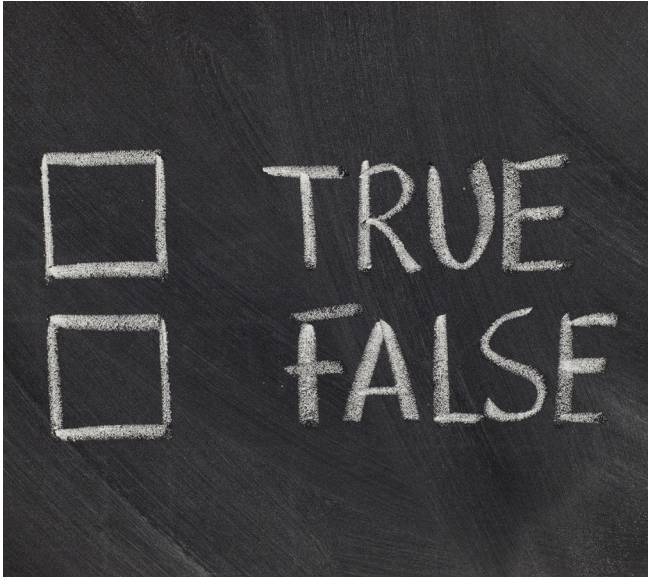
Name that tune

As long as your audio connection is a good one, you can play "Name That Tune" online or even over the phone. One person hums a tune without the words, and others have to guess what song they've chosen.

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Two truths and a tall tale

This is another great game that is fun as an opener or ice breaker for your gathering. Each person takes a turn telling three "facts" about themselves -- but the twist is that one of the "facts" is actually untrue. The others have to guess which statement was a "tall tale."

Online trivia

Sometimes a good old-fashioned trivia contest is an easy way to pass the time together. If your group might like to play trivia, you can either ask each person to gather any trivia cards they might have on hand, or send around links to different *trivia sites*. The goal would be to try to have each person using a different set of questions, so nobody has the answers right at their fingertips!

Step 4: Have Conversation Starters Ready

In the excitement of gathering for your virtual meal, you probably won't have too much trouble finding things to talk about. However, every dinner party has its moments of silence. And because sustaining a multi-person conversation online can be tricky, with more opportunity for people to talk over one another or monopolize the chat, it's a good idea to have some conversation starters chosen ahead of time. Posing a good conversation starter or two can help everyone to feel invited to contribute and keep the communication flowing.

Use the random conversation generator on our site.

You can get a fun and thought-provoking selection of conversation starters served up by visiting our *Conversation page* and hitting the "Start the Conversation" button. Each time you click, you'll see a new idea.

Try a few interview questions.

The interview questions that follow are meant for close friends and family members, and can help you all get to know each other in a new way.

Or go with these tried and true conversation starters.

The questions here work for many different age groups and could be appropriate to ask a newer friend, or your closest family member.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Interview Your Family!

1 Talk about a time you stood up for someone else. What happened? How did you feel?

2 What is a trait of someone in your family that you admire and hope to have inherited?

3 If you could invite any historical figure, living or dead, to dinner, who would you choose? What would you serve? What would you want to ask them?

4 Tell a story of a time you learned something unexpected from someone else.

5 When people talk about you 100 years from now, what do you hope they will say about you?

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Conversation Starters

Cut out these conversation starters and place them in a container to make your own conversation jar!

Tell me something about yourself that you think I might not know.

What was the happiest day of your life so far?

What's the most unusual gift you've ever received?

What's something you did this week that you can be proud of?

What was (or is) a favorite toy or game from your childhood? What made it special to you?

What is the kindest thing someone has said or done for you this week?

What project are you working on right now that you'd like to share something about?

Do you have a favorite piece of clothing? What makes it special?

What's your favorite school subject, hobby or passion? What first attracted you to it?

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you want to live? Why?

What's something you've always wanted to learn to do?

How do you like to spend your time?

If you could make money doing anything in the world, what would you do?

If you could choose one superpower, what would it be?

If you were a season, which season would you be and why?

If you could be best friends with a character from a book, movie or TV show, what character would you choose?

If you could have any animal in the world as a pet, what animal would you choose?

If you could travel to any time and place in history, where and when would you go?

Describe your perfect day.

What is your favorite type of weather?

What would your dream vacation be?

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And don't forget about beginnings and endings.

When everyone's sitting in front of their individual screens, it can be hard to figure out how to settle into a rhythm, and even harder to know when to log off. Try choosing a way to start and end your virtual dinner so the beginning and end are clear. For example, you might start with everyone doing a show-and-tell of their food or ask "If you wrote a newspaper article about your day, what would the headline be?" To wrap up, you could ask "What are three words you'd use to describe our dinner tonight?" or "What's one thing you're looking forward to the next time we do this together?" And remember: The typical family dinner is only about 20 minutes long, so you don't have to spend hours online together (unless you really want to). When you set up your virtual dinner, choose a time frame that's ideally 60 minutes or less, and try to keep expectations clear during the event. "Now that we've all had dessert, how about we play one last game and then sign off?"

If you have a virtual meal with friends or family, *share your stories and tips with us!* We'd love to learn more about how people are staying connected with long-distance dinners.