



# Community Dinners At Home

*A Toolkit for Families, Friends,  
and Neighbors*



THE FAMILY DINNER PROJECT

## Community Dinners at Home

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Decades of research show that sharing meals with others is good for our brains, bodies, and spirits. And the positive effects of eating together go far beyond just our family tables. We now know that at every age, across the lifespan and across continents, people who regularly eat with friends and neighbors are less lonely, have better mental and physical health, and are more satisfied with their lives than those who eat alone.

At a time when technology and current events seem to be pushing us further apart, we keep hearing from people who want to do more to come together. Building our in-person communities, getting to know our neighbors, and spending more time making and bonding with friends is a great antidote to the growing disconnection and loneliness that have become an epidemic in recent years. This toolkit is dedicated to helping you get started with having more frequent, fun, affordable gatherings with the people in your community, whoever they may be.





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### Decide Who to Include

Want to get started with sharing more meals, but not sure who to invite? You can start a regular Community Dinner series with:

- Close friends
  - New acquaintances
  - Colleagues
  - Neighbors
  - Anyone you want to get to know better!
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### Invite Them to Join You

Text, social media, email, snail mail...all are good ways to get people to come to the table! Set a time, date, and location, and be sure to be clear about what they can bring – even if it's just themselves. (More on that later!)

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### Don't Overthink It!

It's easy to get stuck in our own heads and feel nervous or concerned about the details. "What if my house is too small?" "Where will everyone sit?" "What if they don't like the food I serve?" "What if there's nothing to talk about?" Don't let some idea of perfection stop you from trying! There's no perfect home or perfect host, so go ahead and take the first step.





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## Food

Food brings everyone to the table, but it's not the most important part of a Community Dinner. The most important thing is to connect and enjoy each other's company! Whatever you choose to serve, let it be easy, affordable, and fun for you.

And don't be shy about sharing the workload! We're sharing ideas below for ways to make this a true "community dinner," where everyone pitches in to create a wonderful meal.

Looking for recipe inspiration? Check out [thefamilydinnerproject.org/food!](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/food!)

### Option #1: The Host Does the Most

There are two ways to go with this option:

- 1) The host (you!) supplies all the courses for a full meal for everyone. This works well if you love to cook, or if you plan to take turns hosting.
- 2) The host supplies a basic meal – say, main dish and 1-2 sides – and has others bring appetizers, additional sides, drinks, and desserts.

### Option #2: Feeling (Pot)Lucky

A potluck can be wonderful or stressful, depending on how it's organized! We recommend being fairly structured to ensure you don't end up with 12 desserts and no main dish. Our suggestion: The host supplies the main dish and tells everyone what it will be in advance. Then everyone is assigned a course: Appetizer, Side Dish, Salad, Beverage, Dessert.

### Option #3: Stone Soup Style

This is a great way to pool resources! The host invites everyone to bring ingredients or elements of the meal. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Something that can be grilled
- Something to add to a salad
- Something to go with chili
- Something to top a pizza
- Something we can stir-fry
- Something to add to pasta



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### Food

We're sharing sample menus below, but remember, your community "dinner" doesn't have to be extravagant, or even a full dinner! Maybe you'll invite neighbors for Friday night s'mores in the backyard or share ice cream Sundays. Maybe you'd rather do pancake Saturdays or a bring-your-own-sandwich picnic in the park. Let your imagination and schedule set the limits!

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### Bread & Bowls

Make a whole menu out of things that belong in bowls: Soup, stew, or chili. Serve it with bread, and add salad (in bowls) if you like. And nobody ever turned down a bowl of ice cream, pudding, or fruit crumble for dessert!

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### Pasta Party

Build your meal around a crowd-pleasing pasta dish like lasagna, baked ziti, or spaghetti with meatballs. Ask guests to add salad, bread, and Italian-inspired snacks and desserts; or go with the "build your own" pasta bar concept and gather sauces, cheeses, and toppings for a creative pasta station!

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### Backyard Barbecue

Warm weather on the way? Time to break out the grill and the backyard fun! Get creative by asking guests to bring toppings for a gourmet burger bar or their favorite item to pop on a skewer, or keep it simple by providing one protein and one side salad, and invite friends to bring the rest of the meal.

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### Pizza Perfection

Takeout pizza can be a great starting point for a fun, relaxed neighborhood dinner, but you can also make homemade pizzas in a variety of ways. If you're not up to making dough from scratch, try pre-made dough, pita bread, or even English muffins. Let everyone bring their favorite toppings and mix and match. Add salad, fruit, and a dessert (cookie "pizzas," anyone?) and you've got a recipe for a crowd-pleasing evening.

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### Never Boring Boards

Who doesn't like a grazing board? Give your guests a theme and let everyone contribute: Charcuterie board? Fruit and chocolate board? Butter board? Brunch board? Baked potato board? Or you could just call it a "Board Game" and have everyone provide their own favorite type of board to share! (Along with some actual board games to play, of course!)

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### Taco 'Bout Tasty

Two words: Taco. Bar. You provide the basics, your guests bring extra toppings, drinks, and desserts. Of course, you could expand the concept to nachos, fajitas, burritos, or quesadillas, too. The best part is, everyone can build their own perfect creation.

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### Any Which Sandwich

Put everyone at ease with a casual sandwich supper! You can start with a build-your-own sandwich board, or provide the fixings for one main meal on a bun – meatball subs, pulled pork sandwiches, Sloppy Joes, cheesesteaks – and ask guests to supply the chips, dips, fruit and vegetables, and desserts.

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### Fun

Once you've gathered everyone for a meal, it's time to have some fun! We've got lots of game ideas to help you get to know new friends and neighbors, or get closer to people you've known for a while. And don't forget, you can always look for more ideas at: [thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun)

## Getting to Know You Games



### PLAY A RAPID FIRE INTERVIEW GAME!



Pineapple on  
pizza?  
Yes or No?

Coffee  
or Tea?

Cats  
or Dogs?

Sneakers  
or Sandals?

Sunrise  
or Sunset?

Poolside or  
Beachside?

Email or  
Handwritten  
Note?

Books or  
Movies?

Chocolate  
or Vanilla?

Paris or  
London?

Sweet or  
Savory?

Crunchy  
or Chewy?

Summer or  
Winter?

Earth or  
Space?

Pancakes  
or  
Waffles?

Plane or  
Train?

Hike or  
Bike?

Art Museum  
or Science  
Museum?

Mountains  
or Ocean?

Cold pizza for  
breakfast?  
Yes or No?







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## DINNER GAMES

### The Hat Game

Before dinner, have each guest write their answers to one or more of the following questions on slips of paper and place them in a hat. At dinnertime, the host reads the answers aloud, and everyone tries to guess which guest gave which answers!

- What is a book that transformed your life?
- What character in a children's book did you most identify with as a child?
- What was your favorite toy as a child?
- What do you feel most grateful for?
- What do you love most about being a part of this (or your) family?
- What animal would you most like to be?



## DINNER GAMES

### Two Truths and a Tall Tale

Ask everyone at the table to say three things about themselves: Two true things, and one thing that's made up.

The rest of the table will guess which is the tall tale!

Sometimes this game is easier if everyone gets a chance to write down their three things before sharing.







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## WOULD YOU RATHER?



Would you rather be the funniest person in the room, or the smartest?	Would you rather have X-ray vision, or supersonic hearing?	Would you rather have tickets to the Super Bowl, or play in the Super Bowl?	Would you rather be rich working a job you hate, or poor working a job you love?
Would you rather meet one of your ancestors, or one of your future descendants?	Would you rather have an extra finger, or an extra toe?	Would you rather have a personal maid or a personal chef?	Would you rather be able to call a "do-over" once a day, or be able to delete bad memories?
Would you rather live in a zoo on exhibit, or live in total isolation for a year?	Would you rather spend the night in a haunted house, or spend a week on "Survivor?"	Would you rather it snowed inside, or have leaves continuously fall on your bed?	Would you rather stay this age for the rest of your life, or live forever but always look 100 years old?
Would you rather be covered in feathers or fur?	Would you rather turn different colors based on your mood, or always have to speak in questions?	Would you rather take a road trip, or have a luxury spa weekend?	Would you rather always have the same song stuck in your head, or always have the same dream?
Would you rather be famous with a stressful life, or unknown with a peaceful life?	Would you rather be able to speak every language, or play every instrument?	Would you rather go a whole day without seeing, or a whole day without hearing?	Would you rather be entirely covered in hair, or entirely bald everywhere?



### Human Scavenger Hunt

SEE IF YOU CAN FIND...



- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Someone who likes to bake bread                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Two people who will smile back at you                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A person wearing the same color shirt as you         | <input type="checkbox"/> A person who is excited about the future              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A person who can remember life in 1950               | <input type="checkbox"/> Someone who has traveled to more than 3 countries     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A person whose shoes you admire                      | <input type="checkbox"/> A person who regularly makes a special family recipe  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Someone who speaks more than one language            | <input type="checkbox"/> A person who has grown their own food (even one item) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A person with the same favorite pizza topping as you | <input type="checkbox"/> Someone who shares one of your top 5 favorite movies  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Someone who shares your birthday month               | <input type="checkbox"/> Someone who has read more than 2 books this month     |



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## Conversation

Sometimes keeping the conversation flowing feels like the trickiest part of sharing a meal. If you're hoping to get people talking and looking up from their phones, we've got lots of conversation starters you can use to keep things interesting.

For even more conversation ideas, check out:  
[thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation)



### RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

TALK ABOUT: BUILDING COMMUNITY



- What's happening in our neighborhood or community right now to make it a better place? How can we get involved in the effort?
- What are some things we could do to help us get to know our neighbors better?
- Let's brainstorm some actions we can take to spend more time with family, friends, and neighbors this week, this month, and throughout this year.
- How can we give our time, talents, or resources to lift up others? How have others given to us?
- What online communities are you a part of that you value? Why do you value them? Is there a way to create some of that same community face to face?





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## RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

TALK ABOUT: SHARED MEALS



- If you could learn to cook anything, what would it be?
- Share a story about a food from your childhood.
- What's your most memorable family meal?
- Besides the food, what are some things about eating with family or friends that you enjoy?
- What part of your childhood dinners do you want to share with your family and friends?



## RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

TALK ABOUT: SHARING YOUR STORIES



- Tell us about a pet you've had (or have now) that has enriched your life. Do you have any funny or touching stories about that pet you'd like to share?
- Tell us about one moment or day in your life you'd like to live over and over again.
- Think of a person who taught you something meaningful or important. Tell us about that person. What did they teach you? How has it impacted you?
- Talk about a book, movie, or TV show you would make your "desert island" entertainment. What makes it the perfect choice for you?
- Have you ever taken a trip that changed you in some lasting way? Tell us about it.



## RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

TALK ABOUT: ENVISIONING THE FUTURE



- If you could invent one thing to make the future a better place, what would it be and why?
- What would the world be like if we could all live forever?
- If you could travel to the future and see what happens in your life, would you? Why or why not?
- What is one world problem you hope to see solved in the next 20 years?
- What is one wish you have for the future of our nation or our community?



## RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION

TALK ABOUT: MUSIC



- What is the greatest song ever written?
- If you could only listen to 3 albums or artists for the rest of your life, what would you choose?
- Are there any songs or types of music that remind you of specific memories?
- If you could learn to play any instrument, what would you choose and why?





# Make a Conversation Jar!

*Cut these slips apart and place in jars or baskets on the table(s)*

Cut Line

Talk about a time when someone did something thoughtful for you. What was it? Now talk about a time when you did something thoughtful for someone else. How did it make you and the other person feel?

If you could give one present to the whole world, what would it be and why?

Think of a person in your family (living or not) who gave back to others. In what ways did he or she give to others? What could you do to be more like this person?

What is one thing you can do to help someone else that doesn't cost any money?

Do you think it's more important to be kind or to be happy? Why?

In *The Lorax*, Dr. Seuss writes "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." What's something you care a whole awful lot about?

Who has the most power and influence in your community? Why do you think they're powerful?

Have you ever participated in a tradition from a culture that wasn't your own? What was it? How was the experience?

Is "fairness" the same as "justice?" Why or why not?

Have you ever stood up for something you believed in, even if others thought you were wrong? What did you do?

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "With freedom comes responsibility." What do you think that means?

Why do you think public spaces like parks are important to our communities? What's your favorite public space in your neighborhood? What would make your public spaces better?

Are there any cultures, languages or religions you'd be curious to learn more about? What interests you about them?

Have you ever learned something about another person's culture or beliefs that surprised you? What was it?

If you were showing a stranger around your neighborhood, what would you show them, and who would you introduce them to? Why?

What is one world problem you hope to see solved in the next 20 years?

What is the difference between a right and a privilege?

What are some things you can do to show another person you are truly listening to them?



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### Additional Resources

We hope the ideas we've shared so far will help you organize fun and meaningful gatherings with your friends and neighbors! If you're looking for even more resources for future dinners, check out the food, fun, and conversation links below.



#### Family Picnics

[thefamilydinnerproject.org/family-picnics](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/family-picnics)



#### 110 Would You Rather? Questions

[bit.ly/4jWAlFb](http://bit.ly/4jWAlFb)



#### Ice Cream Dance Party

[bit.ly/4jU1dph](http://bit.ly/4jU1dph)



#### Ways to Build Community Through Dinner

[bit.ly/4kmRwQe](http://bit.ly/4kmRwQe)

Thanks for gathering your community to share a meal! If you have questions or want to tell us about your experience, reach out to us at any time or connect with us on social media.

