LEADER’S GUIDE

EAT TOGETHER

EAT BETTER

Developed and funded in part by USDA SNAP-Ed and WSU Extension in partnership with the Washington State Dairy Council.
Funding from Washington State University Extension SNAP-Ed and the Washington State Dairy Commission / Washington Dairy Products Commission supported the development of these materials.

USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program funded this material. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program provides nutrition assistance to people with low income. It can help you buy nutritious foods for a better diet. To find out more, contact your local DSHS Community Service Office.

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I. Introduction

Washington State University (WSU) Extension launched its social marketing campaign in 1996. Called *Eat Together, Eat Better*, it was one of the nation’s pioneering efforts in promoting family meals. The *Eat Together, Eat Better* campaign was successful: families reported increasing the frequency or meals they had together. The *Eat Together, Eat Better* slogan continues to ring true with many people, and many agencies report using it to promote family meals throughout Washington State and the country.

In the 15 years since the first campaign, there has been a growing concern about the health of our population. Research indicates regular family meals support physical, social, and emotional health for children and teens. There is a call for consistent messages to support families to make healthy choices and curb the rising tide of obesity.

WSU Extension, USDA-FNS, and Washington State Dairy Council worked in partnership to update the *Eat Together, Eat Better* materials. Three themes were developed: Cook Together, Talk Together, and Celebrate Together. These messages, when tested among low-income mothers, were found to be effective Core Nutrition Messages by USDA Food and Nutrition Service. A tagline was added, “Set the table for the family, Set roots for a lifetime.” This is our approach: to speak as one voice to promote healthy choice through family meals.

In this leader’s guide, you will find resources for social marketing campaigns to promote family meals in your community. These include updated versions of promotional materials, posters, bookmarks, magnets, and coasters. New activity modules are designed to bring parents and youth together to develop and practice skills to increase frequency of family meals. Supplemental activities (Borrow Boxes) can be incorporated into school classroom and after-school settings.

We wish you well in supporting the families you work with as they discover new ways to enjoy more family meals.

For more information, visit [http://nutrition.wsu.edu/eteb/](http://nutrition.wsu.edu/eteb/).
II. Acknowledgements

The Washington State University Food $ense Program (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education [SNAP-Ed]) gratefully acknowledges the contributions of many individuals in the production of these materials.

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Special thanks to the Massachusetts Department of Health’s WIC Nutrition Program for allowing the use of the phrase, “Set the table for the family…set roots for a lifetime” from the *Touching Hearts, Touching Minds* emotion-based program developed with Pam McCarthy of Pam McCarthy and Associates.

This project would not have been possible without the expertise, passion, and initial development of *Eat Together Eat Better* materials by Martha Marino, MA, RD, CD and Sue N. Butkus, PhD RD.
III. Background Paper on Family Meals for Educators and Health Professionals

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1996, Washington State University and the Washington State Dairy Council have partnered in an ongoing effort to encourage families to eat meals together more often. Although research demonstrating the benefits of family meals was sparse at that time, the topic subsequently has engendered considerable academic interest. The Background Paper on Family Meals (found in Appendix, page 30) summarizes more than 75 studies and offers recommendations for health professionals and educators. It serves as a strong foundation for the connection between shared meals and nutritional and psychosocial health.

The frequency of family meals has been declining over time in the United States and also in Washington State. The number of families that report never or seldom eat together is growing while the number of families that say they usually eat together is decreasing. Although studies vary, it appears that families who eat together 3 to 5 times a week (roughly 40%) remains about the same. Compared to the rest of the world, American children eat together less often than in most other countries, and adults are less likely to eat with other people, even members of their own households.

When children eat with their parents, they generally consume more nutritious foods. They eat greater amounts of vegetables, drink more milk, and possibly consume more fruit. Children and teens who have family meals with their parents consume greater amounts of calcium, iron, potassium, zinc, folate, fiber, and vitamins B-6, B-12, C and E. They consume less fat, including saturated and trans fat. Youth who regularly eat dinner with their parents are more likely to consume breakfast, whether or not adults are present. Most studies have found that children who often eat together with their families are less likely to be obese.

Beyond nutritional benefits, children and teens who eat together with their families are more likely to get better grades in school, have a broader vocabulary, use controlled substances less (alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and marijuana), be less depressed, and contribute more to their community and society.

By far the greatest barrier to family meals is the busy schedules of parents, children, and teens. Other barriers include: lack of cooking skills, family members not liking the same foods, lack of planning, competition with electronic media,
not knowing how to engage in conversation, not having a table or other place to
eat together, arguing at dinnertime, and teens’ desire to be autonomous.

Many health professionals and child advocates strongly support family meals. The American Heart Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Society for Research in Child Development, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, and other organizations recommend that parents eat with their children for better diets and emotional health. To accomplish this, parents need the time, ability to plan, basic kitchen skills, and access to healthy food options. Professionals working with parents can assist them to find strategies that work in various family situations so that they can eat together and eat better.
IV. *Eat Together, Eat Better* Educational Materials & Incentives

**OVERVIEW**

*Eat Together, Eat Better* (ETEB) educational materials support nutrition, parent, and youth educators in teaching the importance of family meals in setting roots for a lifetime. Through the use of three related themes—Celebrate Together, Cook Together, and Talk Together—participants will understand benefits of family meals and increase their motivation to incorporate family meals into their routine. The table below provides a summary of ETEB materials available to the public.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Available to download from Washington State University Extension</strong> (<a href="http://www.nutrition.wsu.edu">www.nutrition.wsu.edu</a>)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Theme-based Activity Modules</td>
<td>Each module supports one theme and includes three different 45-minute lessons, for adults, youth, and families. The lessons use interactive learning styles. Target: Parents/caregivers, youth, and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipe Cards</td>
<td>Include kid-friendly recipes with suggestions on how to incorporate each of the themes into family meals. Target: Parents, families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk Together Bowl &amp; Conversation Starters</td>
<td>Support all three themes and encourage youth and families to talk together at meals. Each sheet of Talk Together starters is age-specific. Target: Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrow Box</td>
<td>Educational activity kits for use in classrooms or after-school settings. Activities support each theme. Target: School classrooms, youth K-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETEB Backgrounder</td>
<td>Summarizes the science behind the slogan; includes annotated resource bibliography. Target: Educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Availability to order from Washington State Dairy Council</strong> (<a href="http://www.eatsmart.org">http://www.eatsmart.org</a>)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster with Two B&amp;W Masters</td>
<td>The poster is 11 × 17 inches, full color. The line masters on the reverse side of the poster provide benefits and tips on how families can start eating family meals more often. Target: Families, parents, youth Cost: $1.00 ea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETEB Handout</td>
<td>Two-sided color version benefits and tips on how families can start eating family meals more often. Target: Families, parents, youth Cost: $0.30 ea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnets</td>
<td>Refrigerator magnets with updated <em>Eat Together, Eat Better</em> artwork, promoting Celebrate Together, Cook Together, and Talk Together. Target: Families, parents, youth Cost: $0.30 ea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coasters</td>
<td>Include conversation starters to support the Talk Together theme and to get people talking about family meals. Target: Families Cost: $2.00 per set of four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookmarks</td>
<td>Include five different bookmarks/themes; each has a unique activity. Target: Youth Cost: $3.75 per package of 30 different bookmarks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Setting the Context for Teaching the Lessons: The Learner-Centered Approach

The Eat Together, Eat Better (ETEB) adult lessons are based on adult learning theory, and use a learner-centered approach to promote family meals with parents and caregivers. The learner-centered approach takes into account adult learning styles, life experiences, and learning needs using the “4A” design. The educator serves as a facilitator of dialogue between participants with the goal of supporting learning. This design encompasses what we know about adult learning, combining presentation of new information with an opportunity to use the information in a safe environment and time to reflect on how that information can be used in daily life.

The 4 As

Anchor: The anchor serves as the warm-up activity. The activity introduces the topic of the learning by building on previous experiences and knowledge. It helps the learner name what they know about the topic and gives them a context to put new information. Working as partners or in small groups allows participants to get to know each other, helps create a safe learning environment, and sets the foundation for what is coming next.

Add: The add section of the lesson provides information that relates to the topic that the learners need to know before they can take action. This is intended to be brief and to share only what the learner needs to know. The goal of this segment is to engage learners with new information, and relate the information to participants’ lives.

Apply: This activity provides the learner opportunity to talk about the new information and practice using the information in a safe environment. These are usually hands-on activities, with participants working together in pairs or small groups, allowing learners to share ideas and practical tips to apply the new knowledge.

Away: The away activity asks the learner, “What will you do with this information?” It provides the learners an opportunity to reflect on what they learned and how to apply new skills to their lives. The activity helps the learners take the information away with them, with concrete ideas on how to use the information outside of the learning setting.
Experiential Learning

The youth and family lessons are based on social learning theory using an Experiential Learning Model. This approach is based on learning-by-doing or practicing a skill or behavior. Reflection on the experience is a key component of the learning. Experiences lead to learning if the participant understands what happened, sees patterns of observations, and is able to generalize observations and apply them in new situations.

Each lesson has three parts: Do, Reflect, and Apply.

- **Do:** This youth activity section introduces the “What?” The activity introduces new information and pushes the youth to a new level of knowledge.

- **Reflect:** The process of reflection helps define the “So what?” Youth share their reactions to and observations of the topic and analyze the experience. This provides an opportunity to explore what they learned and make meaning of their experience.

- **Apply:** The Apply section defines the “Now what?” This process helps the youth connect their experience and relate their own analysis of the experience to their lives. Then, they explore how to apply the learning to another situation.

![Experiential Learning Diagram](http://www.4-h.org/images/curriculum/horse/giddy-up-and-go/Learn-by-Doing-Approach.pdf)

Scheduling the Lessons

_Eat Together, Eat Better_ has no set schedule. You decide the frequency and scheduling that works best for your program and participants. The sites that pilot-tested the lessons used a variety of formats.

Here are some possible options:

- Adult program one lesson at a time, once a week
- After-school program one lesson at a time, once a month
- School family nights one lesson at a time, once a quarter
- Programs that meet with parents and youth in separate, concurrent lessons and then together for the family session, weekly, monthly, or as requested

Location Considerations

_Eat Together, Eat Better_ includes a variety of learning formats that support experiential learning. The ideal space provides small tables that encourage opportunities for participants to engage in conversations and writing. The youth and family lessons also include food preparation activities. Most of the recipes are simple and easy to prepare, but some ingredients require refrigeration and most require some setup. A nearby sink for hand washing and cleanup will make the preparation easier.

Staffing Considerations

Choices for staff can determine program success.

One staff member can lead adult lessons for a class of 8-12 adults.

Youth lessons may need more than one staff depending on age range and number of youth. Recommend one staff per 7-10 youth.

Family sessions will require one staff to facilitate the adult group and one or more staff to facilitate the youth group. These staff work together to co-facilitate the family session (parent/caregiver and youth together). If the family lesson is done as a stand-alone lesson, two staff are recommended.

Additional staff or volunteers to assist with setup and support for cooking activities can be helpful.

Allow adequate staff time for preparation, delivery, and debriefing after class.

Childcare may be needed if a number of participants have young children unable to participate in the youth program. It is recommended to have qualified providers...
with background checks at a ratio of one provider to five children. Here are some suggestions for childcare:

- Older trained youth who have completed certificate baby-sitting class
- Class hosted by church or other group with childcare facility on site
- Care-providers by after-school program
- RSVP volunteers or service club
- Trained, older high school students when supervised

**Recruitment**

You will want to consider a variety of approaches when recruiting participants for your program. Think about past recruitment efforts that have worked to reach your target audience. Consider working with community partners to reach out to your audience.

*Eat Together, Eat Better* is designed to stimulate discussion and problem solving that can happen through active participation. To help keep everyone involved, a group of seven to ten participants is recommended.

Here are some suggestions for recruitment:

- Promote the program at a parent night at school.
- Put a notice in your organization’s newsletter.
- Use social media: post announcements on your organization’s Facebook page.
- Send flyers home in school envelopes.
- Put up Event Announcement Flyer (Appendix, page 22) in public spots, like grocery stores, laundromats, libraries, etc.
- Work with a school staff member to help identify potential families.
- Make presentations to social groups, service, or faith based organizations.
- Approach PTAs / PTOs as hosts, facilitators, source of families, meal preparation, and for extra volunteers
- Create exhibits/displays at Family Night Out.
- Get publicity for current class, feature story, public interest (see Appendix, pages 20-22).
- List on community agency website.
- List on school / community center reader board.
Your Role as Facilitator

The *Eat Together, Eat Better* modules are designed to support participants’ learning by sharing new information, providing opportunity to reflect on how this information relates to their lives, and practicing how they might use the new information once they leave the classroom.

The design relies on providing a safe learning environment that supports this process. Consider these elements when facilitating your groups:

**Create a welcoming atmosphere.** Consider participants as your guests: provide for their comfort and convenience; make coming to class easy and attractive. Arrange the room to allow participants to gather in small groups to facilitate conversation. Set the tables. Put color markers and sticky notes or note pads in the center if needed. Set your own table. Place a tablecloth on your table and colorful bags or baskets. Make it as attractive as you can. Make a welcome sign and place it where participants can see it. Provide nametags and ask learners to write their name in large print. Have all the materials prepared and ready for your participants. Each lesson plan includes a checklist of handouts and materials needed to conduct the lesson. Review the list and gather the materials ahead of time. Below is a list of general materials.

**Materials checklist**

**General room set up:**
- Tablecloth
- Baskets or table decorations
- Sticky notes
- Color markers
- Flip chart, white board, or chalkboard
- Nametags
- Welcome sign
- Sign in sheet
- Photo Release Form  
  (see Appendix, page 29)
- Digital camera

**General cooking equipment:**
- Cleaning / sanitizing solutions
- Paper towels
- Plastic gloves
- Serving utensils
- Napkins
- Tasting cups
- Eating utensils

**Review of facilitation skills.**

- Create a welcoming environment. Greet participants as they enter.
- Review the curriculum. Be clear on the main points and sequence of the lesson.
• Encourage dialogue. People learn by sharing their experiences; ask open-ended questions. Provide open and non-judgmental feedback.

• Encourage working in small groups. Some participants feel more comfortable sharing in small groups.

• At the end of the lesson, be sure to reflect back on the discussion, to help participants take the new knowledge and skills to use in their lives.

Ground rules can help create the atmosphere you want to support participation and learning. You may negotiate ground rules within in each group, for both adult and youth, or use established ground rules, allowing the group to add as needed. It is helpful to post the ground rules, in large clearly written type so all participants can see them. Review the ground rules at the beginning of each session. As the facilitator, demonstrate the ground rules by practicing them throughout the meeting yourself.

Here are some examples of ground rules:

• Everyone participates. This assumes everyone will participate, at least mentally, in each activity. This is a time to ask participants to turn off cell phones or other electronic devices.

• Everyone has a right to pass. This protects participants from having to speak out, from revealing themselves when they may not wish to.

• All opinions are honored. Honoring each person’s attitudes, opinions, and beliefs emphasizes life experiences and personal worth. This rule affirms the adult’s ability to think and decide for him- or herself, and protects from the group or program deciding what is right or wrong.

• Leader will maintain group time. Dialogue and sharing is important to learning. However, to respect everyone’s time commitment, the facilitator will be the “group time keeper.”

Handling sensitive issues. These lessons encourage critical thinking and discussion about family meals. As a result, personal or sensitive issues about family life may arise. Try to anticipate and prepare for these. During the lessons, create an accepting environment where everyone feels comfortable participating and safe in expressing their thoughts. Don’t insist that individuals participate if they seem uncomfortable. As a facilitator, model respect, honor, and support cultural or family differences that may arise. If needed, consider asking a participant to talk with you or another trusted person after the lesson.
THE EAT TOGETHER, EAT BETTER GROUP LESSONS

Goal: The Eat Together, Eat Better (ETEB) lessons support nutrition, parent, and youth educators in teaching the importance of family meals in “setting roots for a life time.” Through three related themes—Cook Together, Talk Together, and Celebrate Together—participants will understand benefits of family meals, build skills to support family meals, and gain insight on how to incorporate family meals into their routine.

Objectives

By the end of the lessons participants will:

• Identify the benefits of family meals that mean the most to them,
• Select strategies to overcome barriers to having family meals,
• Practice skills to simplify meal preparation by engaging kids in meal planning, preparation, and cleanup,
• Explore cultural food preferences, rituals, and traditions as a way to enhance family meals,
• Collect ideas and techniques with which to begin conversation and sharing during family meals,
• Set a goal to maintain or increase the frequency of family meals.

Eat Together, Eat Better materials are designed as supplementary lessons or activities to a curriculum or program primarily used by nutrition and parenting educators who serve audiences with limited resources, but the content is not restrictive. The Modules will be useful with all families. The ETEB activity modules were developed around three teachable sub-themes that support family meals: Cook Together, Talk Together, and Celebrate Together. Each theme includes 60-minute lessons for parent/caregiver, youth ages 6 to 12, and families.

The lessons were also designed to offer in a family program or at an event. Parent and youth lessons are offered at the same time, then these groups come together for the family lesson. The family lesson reinforces the concepts taught in the parent and youth lessons. Suggested time for the family program is two hours, allowing 45 minutes for the youth and parent session separately, 15 minutes of transition and 45 minutes for the family session and wrap up.

The lessons use a mix of interactive learning formats, including small- and large-group discussions, brainstorming, planning, and cooking activities. All of these activities create discussion, encourage problem solving, and develop skills to support family meals.

The Activity Modules can be downloaded from http://nutrition.wsu.edu/eteb/.
## Adult Lessons

### Cook Together
Children learn about cooking by watching parents and caregivers. In this lesson, adults identify ways to engage the family in cooking together.

- Identify the benefits of cooking together that mean the most to them.
- Identify appropriate skills for children to help prepare meals.
- Plan a meal to prepare together as a family.

### Talk Together
Communication is how families connect. In this lesson, adults practice communication skills to promote healthy conversation at mealtime.

- Identify benefits of talking together at mealtime.
- Practice communication skills.
- Identify one communication skill to try at home when planning and preparing family meals.

### Celebrate Together
Food is a very important part of how we celebrate. In this lesson, adults explore ways to pass along culture and traditions.

- Identify how family celebrations and traditions influence the health and well-being of our children.
- Recognize that food is a very common and important aspect of celebrations.
- Identify healthy choices for family celebrations.

## Youth Lessons

### Cook Together
Cooking together lets youth learn new skills and build confidence and independence in cooking. In this lesson, youth develop skills in kitchen safety.

- Describe kitchen safety rules using appropriate kitchen tool.
- Plan kitchen safety based on recipe.
- Prepare recipe to share with their family.

### Talk Together
Communication influences our choices and decisions. In this lesson, youth develop communication skills around food and food choices.

- Develop communication skills by taking turns talking.
- Practice listening skills.
- Create a list of conversation topics for family mealtime.

### Celebrate Together
The foods we use to celebrate shape food habits and preferences. In this lesson, youth explore healthy choices for celebrations.

- Explore how families and communities celebrate.
- Identify family traditions or rituals as celebrations.
- Select healthy choices for family celebrations.

## Family Lessons

### Cook Together
Cooking together establishes family traditions. In this lesson, families work together to plan meals to cook together.

- Identify a task for everyone to help in preparing the meal.
- Identify the benefits of cooking together.
- Prepare a recipe together.

### Talk Together
Conversation makes for engaging family meals. In this lesson, families practice conversation skills using conversation starters.

- Select conversation starters to use at family meals.
- Practice conversation skills as a family.
- Prepare a recipe together.

### Celebrate Together
Celebrations unite people, giving them a common bond. In this lesson, families explore ways they celebrate and plan a celebration considering healthy choices.

- Identify parts of family celebrations that mean the most to them.
- Plan a family celebration that includes healthy choices.
- Prepare a recipe together.
THE EAT BETTER, EAT TOGETHER BORROW BOX ACTIVITIES

The “Borrow Box” contains subject matter-specific supplemental activities that include lessons, master worksheets, teaching tools and props. WSU Extension Food $ense uses borrow boxes to extend supplemental activities to classrooms through teachers. A school can sign up to “borrow” the box of easy-to-use activities from local Food $ense office.

The 27 supplemental activities in the ETEB Borrow Box incorporate an array of activities that span three sub-themes (Cook Together, Celebrate Together, and Talk Together) and four learning levels, along with additional supplies to carry out the lessons. An overview of the content of the Eat Together, Eat Better Borrow Box is below. A PowerPoint presentation to introduce these materials and downloadable files can be found at: [http://nutrition.wsu.edu/eteb/](http://nutrition.wsu.edu/eteb/).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Activity Title</th>
<th>Grade K</th>
<th>Grades 1-2</th>
<th>Grades 3-4</th>
<th>Grades 5-6</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Talk Together (Green Folders)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Music &amp; Table Talk</td>
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<td>Thunder Cake</td>
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<td>Family Pictures Dialogue</td>
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<td><strong>Cook Together (Yellow Folders)</strong></td>
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<td>MyPerfect Plate</td>
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<td>Making Fruit Salad</td>
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<td>Making a Healthy Salad</td>
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<td><strong>Celebrate Together (Orange Folders)</strong></td>
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<td>Thanksgiving Classroom Book</td>
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<td>How My Parents Learned to Eat</td>
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<td>Foods Around the World</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning a Special Celebration</td>
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<td><strong>Other Supplies</strong></td>
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<td>WA State Dairy Council food models</td>
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<td>Container of dried beans w/measuring cups</td>
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<td>Apron (with pockets)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ten paper plates</td>
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V. Promoting *Eat Together, Eat Better* in your Community

If people hear or see information about your activities in more than one place, they are more likely to become involved. Good promotion and positive publicity can create excitement for *Eat Together, Eat Better* and generate support from volunteers and community organizations. The more creative you are, the more successful your promotion.

**INVOLVE OTHERS TO GET THE MESSAGE OUT!**

Talk to everyone you know about *Eat Together, Eat Better*. If you belong to an organization, suggest an emphasis on family meals and ask others to help you promote the ideas. Community organizations often have educational events or activities on topics of concern to families and the community. These include Kiwanis, Lions Clubs, Rotary, Civitan, PTA, churches, Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, and 4-H Clubs. Local associations can support *Eat Together, Eat Better* by publicizing activities in press releases, newsletter announcements, informing members about activities, and volunteering to help.

**POTENTIAL ADVERTISING VENUES**

- shopping malls, supermarkets posters
- community centers bulletin boards
- libraries
- recreational events
- community and youth organizations
- health fairs, hospitals, HMO’s
- insurance companies
- school lunch menus. Families really do read them!
- Faith-based organizations
- PTA newsletters
- daycare center newsletters
- community events calendars in the newspaper or on the radio
- service club newsletters and bulletins
- school nurses
- social media channels organization website, Facebook, or Twitter.

Use of the *Eat Together, Eat Better* logo and artwork is authorized by an agreement between the Washington State Dairy Council / Washington Dairy Products
Commission and Washington State University Extension. If your agency would like permission to use the artwork, please contact Martha Marino, Washington State Dairy Council, marino@eatsmart.org.

IDEAS FOR COMMUNITY EVENTS

Invite A Special Person to Promote family meals.
- Local politicians (mayor, city council members, school board members, etc.) may have some special memories to share or they may always allow time for family meals.
- Athletes from high school, college, or professional sports teams may have a special story.
- Chefs volunteer to do community events. Contact your local chapter of the American Culinary Federation’s Chef and Child Foundation or the local or state representative of the National Restaurant Association for a reference.

Sponsor a Family, Food, and Fun Night to Promote Family Meals

For a Family, Food, and Fun Night, the school or community organization provides a family-style meal for the family and the school or community educator provides an educational program focused on eating together as a family. Service clubs may fund the dinner and the school personnel prepare the dinner.

Hold Contests

Offer poster and essay contests about family meals. Partner with local Girl Scout/Boy Scout troops, Boys and Girls Clubs or 4-H to offer a special ribbon, medal, badge or certificate for activities that promote the family meals theme.

Develop Booths and Displays

Develop booths and displays at libraries, shopping malls, community centers, health or education fairs, back-to-school events, food banks and clinics. Arrange for an Eat Together, Eat Better exhibit at health-related local races/walks/bike rides. Several topics may be appropriate and effective for a booth or display including low cost meals for families, meals that everyone in the family can help prepare, ideas for mealtime conversations and other tips for eating together.

Mail Materials to Family Centers

Mail Eat Together, Eat Better materials to daycare centers and encourage them to reproduce the materials for parents and newsletters.
Report A Family’s Experiences Eating Together

Partner with a local media such as TV station, radio, or newspaper to challenge families who do not usually eat together to try it for one week and report their experiences. Did they like the extra sharing time? Was this a good experience? Would they like to do it again?

Incorporate the theme in existing programs

Check local calendars of community events at the Chamber of Commerce. Think about organizations you belong to and others who might be interested such as youth, parent, nutrition and education groups.

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Consider using the media, radio, television, local cable stations, and newspapers, to share your community’s efforts and success in promoting family health. Local media like to be involved with the communities they serve, especially regarding health issues. Many food-related businesses, such as food retailers and restaurants may be potential sponsors for media initiatives.

Make Stories Newsworthy

Hard news stories which are issues that readers need to know right now. Feature stories are produced for a special weekly newspaper section or a special broadcast.

Newsworthiness of a story depends on:

- **Timeliness.** Is this news right now? Can you integrate the topic around calendar events (ie. Mother’s Day [May], Nutrition Month [March], Family Meals Week [October]).
- **Human Interest.** Is there some human interest? Does it tell a story about people? Can people relate to the story in an emotional or appealing way? Many newspapers have sections targeted to children. Work with dailies or weeklies to feature meals in which parents and children prepare a meal together.
- **Accuracy.** Stories must be accurate before they are published. Check facts twice.
- **Credibility.** The story needs solid facts on family meals.
- **The Community.** Put a local twist on your story to make it important to people in the community
- **Trends.** If the story supports a trend or national story, that will help promote it.
- **Visual Appeal.** Photos can add appeal to an article. The visual appeal is essential for television and helps get a good spot in a newspaper. The best photographs are action-oriented.
VI. Evaluation

Evaluation gives you and your program a sense of what families know and think about the major *Eat Together, Eat Better* topics and family meals. Conducting evaluation and summarizing responses can be helpful in several ways:

- Responses to the session evaluation forms will give you a good sense of how much families know about the *Eat Together, Eat Better* topics. Understanding participants’ skill level and opinions will help you tailor the sessions to their needs and interests.

- The program evaluation will help you gauge how much families learned during their sessions.

- The information from the evaluation will give you data you can use to plan future *Eat Together, Eat Better* sessions as well as other programs. The data may also be useful in making presentations to current and potential funders.

Four evaluation tools are provided to help you assess the impact of your program.

The *Eat Together, Eat Better* evaluation (see Appendices) is a post-then-pre design, to be conducted at the end of the program. This evaluation asks a set of questions as a result of the program, then a second set of questions that asks participants to rate their behaviors and beliefs before the program.

One evaluation tool is provided for each of the sessions, Cook Together, Talk Together, and Celebrate Together. These evaluations are designed to be conducted at the end of each session, and provide feedback on participant opinions and confidence in their skills to implement program content in their lives.

Keep the evaluation upbeat! Remind participants that this is not a test! There are no right or wrong answers. The information will be kept confidential and be used to help develop the program.
VII. Appendices

The following pages contain resources and sample documents to help you as you implement *Eat Together, Eat Better* in your community. These materials may be adapted to the specific circumstances and unique requirements of your implementation.

Sample Media Advisory .................................................. 20*
Sample Media Release .................................................. 21*
Sample Event Announcement Flyer .................................... 22*
Sample Fact Sheet ....................................................... 23*
*Eat Together, Eat Better* Evaluation .................................. 24*
Photo Release Form ...................................................... 29*
Background Paper ......................................................... 30

*Available for download at [http://nutrition.wsu.edu/eteb/](http://nutrition.wsu.edu/eteb/).
Sample Media Advisory

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For more information contact:

[Contact name and phone number]

Media Advisory

Who: [Your organization and other participants]

What: *Eat Together, Eat Better* event, is an exciting time for our community to celebrate family mealtimes. Whether a family is big or small, with two parents or just one and with any number of children, eating together as a family is important. Eating together in a fun, relaxed atmosphere improves nutrition, strengthens family bonds, and helps children do better in school. This is an opportunity for the community to start a new tradition.

When: [Dates and schedule of events]

Where: [Your organization’s name and address]

Interview Opportunities: [List any community leaders who are supporting this effort, nutritionists, social workers, police, school board members, principals, and other celebrities or officials who will participate]

Photo Opportunities:

- [List activities that make good pictures.] Some examples include:
  - Local celebrities eating with their families
  - Restaurants that might promote family mealtimes
  - Grocery stores making displays of foods that make a great meal
  - Community gardens that are producing food for families
  - Families shopping or preparing meals together, etc.
Sample Media Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For more information contact:

[Date]
[Contact name & phone number]

[Your organization] Promotes Eat Together, Eat Better Days

[Your Community] Shows that Family Meals means Eating Together is Eating Better.

City, State—[your community] will participate in an Eat Together, Eat Better event [date]. [Your community] will conduct a series of activities to show how families eat better when they eat together.

Over the next [week, month], [your community] will be celebrating family meal times. All families are encouraged to take the time to participate in the community events and to eat together as a family says [your spokesperson]. “Sharing experiences around food is important for families. Researchers have shown that families who develop positive mealtimes, do better overall. Besides eating more healthfully, the families have stronger family bonds and the children do better in school. The families also save money.”

The benefit of children and adults eating together as a family occurs in all families. So whether a family is big or small, with two parents or one, with many children, or few, with grandparent and grandchild or stepparents and children, families can still celebrate family meals. Eating together in a fun, relaxed atmosphere improves nutrition, strengthens family bonds and helps children do better in school. This is an opportunity for families across the community to celebrate together.

Eat Together, Eat Better event, is an exciting time for our community to celebrate family mealtimes.

[Describe community activities here]

Other participants in Eat Together, Eat Better Days include [list local participants].

When families eat together, they eat better. Eating together in a fun, relaxed setting improves nutrition, strengthens family bonds, and helps children do better in school.

*Eat Together Eat Better* is a program offered by WSU Extension. Participants will gather ideas and tips to make family meals a priority. Class topics include tips to include family members in preparing meals, ideas to have happy, relaxing conversation at mealtime, and simple ways to bring excitement and celebration into family meals.
[Your community] and Team Nutrition

Eat Together, Eat Better for a better future

- Families eat more nutritiously and a greater variety of foods when they eat together.
- Families and health professionals cite better communication as the most frequent benefit to eating together.
- Students do better in school when they eat with their families. In a survey of high school seniors, students who regularly ate dinner with their families at least four times a week scored better than those who did not.
- Students have fewer behavioral problems when they eat meals with their families. Students ages 12 to 18 showed better adjustment when they ate meals five times a week than those students who ate meals three or fewer times a week.
- Most families usually eat dinner together about 3-5 times a week.
- The biggest barriers to eating together are busy schedules like work and evening activities. It takes creativity to balance busy schedules.
- On-the-average, families devote about an hour to the evening meal---35 minutes are spent preparing it and 30 minutes eating.
- The food a family chooses to eat at mealtimes is influenced by children in most households and whoever is preparing the meal tries to make meals that appeal to both children and adults.
- The theme for this campaign is Eat Together, Eat Better to emphasize how important it is for families to share time and activities around food.
- Activities are designed to teach our students and community that nutrition is the link between eating together and good health.
- The activities include [list activities].
- The activities will take place [give location, date and time].
- Participants include [list other participants]
Eat Together, Eat Better Evaluation

We are conducting this evaluation to determine the outcomes of the Eat Together, Eat Better program. Your participation is voluntary, but encouraged, and your results will be anonymous. Please circle the answer that most accurately represents you and your family. Thank you!

1. On average, how many family meals do you have per week?
   a. never or seldom (0–2 times)
   b. most days (3–5 times)
   c. usually (6–7 times)

2. How often do you cook with your family each week?
   a. 0–1 time
   b. 2–3 times
   c. 4 times or more

3. While eating meals together, how much of the time is your family talking together?
   a. a little bit of the time
   b. some of the time
   c. a good bit of the time
   d. most of the time

4. How important is celebrating with your family?
   a. not important
   b. a little bit important
   c. somewhat important
   d. important
   e. very important
   f. extremely important

[Over]
The questions you just answered were about the present. Now we want you to look back and think about the time before you participated in *Eat Together, Eat Better*. On this page please answer the questions based on what meals were like with your family before you participated in the program. This side of the evaluation is designed to understand what participants’ habits were prior to the program. Thank you!

1. On average, how many family meals did you have per week before the start of ETEB?
   a. 0–1 time
   b. 2–3 times
   c. 4 times or more

2. Before beginning ETEB, how often did you cook with your family each week?
   a. 0–1 time
   b. 2–3 times
   c. 4 times or more

3. Before participating in ETEB, while eating meals together, how much of the time did your family talk together?
   a. a little bit of the time
   b. some of the time
   c. a good bit of the time
   d. most of the time

4. Before beginning ETEB, how important was celebrating with your family?
   a. not important
   b. a little bit important
   c. somewhat important
   d. important
   e. very important
   f. extremely important
Cook Together Evaluation (Lesson 1)

This short evaluation is being conducted to determine the outcomes of the *Eat Together, Eat Better* program. Your participation is voluntary, but encouraged, and your results will be anonymous. Please be open and honest in your answers. Thank you!

1. What are some reasons to cook together as a family?

2. What benefits of cooking together are most important to you?

3. What are some ways to involve family members in preparing a meal?
Talk Together Evaluation (Lesson 2)

This short evaluation is being conducted to determine the outcomes of the *Eat Together, Eat Better* program. Your participation is voluntary, but encouraged, and your results will be anonymous. Please be open and honest in your answers. Thank you!

1. What are some guidelines you think are important to keep in mind for mealtime conversations?

2. What are some of the benefits of talking together at mealtimes?

3. Thinking about your family, what are some ways you could start conversation?
Celebrate Together Evaluation (Lesson 3)

This short evaluation is being conducted to determine the outcomes of the Eat Together, Eat Better program. Your participation is voluntary, but encouraged, and your results will be anonymous. Please be open and honest in your answers. Thank you!

1. What are some reasons food is used in celebrations?

2. What changes or additions would you like to include in your next family celebration?

3. What food could you include to make healthy options part of your celebration?

4. What are some ways that rituals, traditions, and celebrations influence the health and wellbeing of our children?
Photo Model Release Form

I hereby grant permission to be photographed, voluntarily and without compensation, by Washington State University, understanding that the same is intended for publication by print media, newspaper, television, video, or motion picture.

I additionally consent to the use of my name in connection with the publication by print media, newspaper, television, video, or motion pictures of photographs taken of me.

Subject/ model signature Date

Parent/guardian signature (if model is a minor) Date

Witness Date

Insert logo / organization name here.
Background Paper on Family Meals for Educators and Health Professionals

This background paper distills research and other information about family meals so that nutrition educators, health professionals, and child advocates may understand the basis for promoting eating together, as well as the current controversies and unknowns. This report is part of an ongoing effort by Washington State University and the Washington State Dairy Council to encourage families to eat meals together more often. Our organizations care about the nutritional health and well-being of kids, teens, and parents, and for many years, we have produced tools and resources for educators and health professionals to help families eat together and eat better.

HISTORY OF WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION’S EAT TOGETHER, EAT BETTER PROGRAM

When Washington State University (WSU) Extension launched its social marketing campaign in 1996. Called Eat Together, Eat Better, it was one of the nation’s pioneers in promoting family meals. With funding for a social marketing campaign from what was then called the Food Stamp Program in the United States Department of Agriculture–Food and Nutrition Services (USDA-FNS), a coalition was formed of key leaders in Washington State from USDA-FNS programs, agricultural commodity commissions, including the Washington State Dairy Council (WSDC), child hunger advocacy groups, and commodity commissions. This broad-based coalition, called the Nutrition Education Network of Washington, decided to conduct focus groups of low-income parents to determine the best ways to implement nutrition education messaging. In those focus groups, parents said that they wanted to know how to eat together more often with their families. The information that we wanted to teach them—nutrition, budgeting their food dollars, and cooking skills—was secondary to them. One mother said, “When we eat together, we all eat better,” and that became the slogan for our program. Based on input from the people in the focus groups, we conducted a direct-mail social marketing campaign with four brochures. These included tips for eating together, managing food budgets, and tips for using seasonal foods. Development of the brochures was provided in part from pro bono services of The Food Professionals, Tree Top, Inc., Washington Egg Commission, and Continental Mills. Our campaign was successful: the post-test found that families who received our mailings read them and increased their weekly frequency of family meals.
At the time that we created the campaign, data on family meals to support our coalition’s approach was limited to just one published paper on nutritional benefits and one paper presented at a conference that pointed to better mental health adjustment among teens. In the years that followed, gradually more research projects were undertaken and published, and now a cascade of evidence supports the benefits of family meals, both in dietary intake and in psycho-social health.

Our phrase, Eat Together, Eat Better, rang true with many people. In the years spanning the development of our campaign, even to this day, the slogan has been used by health departments, school programs, WIC programs, websites, blogs, faith-based institutions, and many media stories. Eat Together, Eat Better materials such as magnets and stickers with the logo, were distributed through the Washington State Dairy Council. Additional materials were added to WSU Extension’s website for the Nutrition Education Network of Washington, including downloadable black-and-white masters, placemats, and bookmarks.

Now, more than 15 years since the launch of the first Eat Together, Eat Better campaign, new nutrition education materials with the same title have been developed in a partnership between WSU Extension and WSDC. The program this time came at the request of leading food assistance agencies in Washington State, including, Child Nutrition Services in the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction; the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program; the Emergency Feeding Program; additional USDA-FNS agencies; and others. In a discussion about consistent messaging that could help improve nutritional intake of low-income families, particularly with children pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, the group decided that a unifying message to promote family meals would also promote improved diet. This umbrella message would serve as a platform for other key nutrition messages: eat more fruits and vegetables; move to lower-fat dairy products; help prevent childhood obesity; and economize on food purchases.

The Eat Together, Eat Better campaign includes three themes: Cook Together, Talk Together, and Celebrate Together. These themes stem from messages that were tested among low-income mothers and children and found effective by the USDA-FNS in its report, “Maximizing the Message: Helping Moms and Kids Make Healthier Food Choices,” www.fns.usda.gov/fns/corenutritionmessages. Two of the 16 tested messages were:

“Cook together. Eat together. Talk together. Make mealtime a family time.”

“Make meals and memories together. It’s a lesson they’ll use for life.”
The report encouraged nutrition educators, particularly those working within USDA-FNS agencies, to use this wording to “speak with one voice” by using messaging that was tested to effectively resonate with the intended audiences.

On the poster and handouts for the current Eat Together, Eat Better campaign is the phrase, “Set the table for the entire family. Set roots for a lifetime.” These words were provided with permission by the Touching Hearts, Touching Minds emotion-based education program through the Massachusetts Department of Health’s WIC Nutrition Program. The phrase was field tested and found to be effective with low-income WIC parents, and was subsequently used in its module on family meals.

WSU Extension has pilot tested activity modules that target low-income adults, families, and youth with three Eat Together, Eat Better themes: Cook Together, Talk Together, and Celebrate Together. The modules include lessons, worksheets, recipe cards, and “borrow boxes,” which include books and support materials for youth classrooms. Following the pilot test and revision process, the modules will be available for others to use. Working with WSU Extension, WSDC produced educational materials including a poster, handout, Spanish translation of the handout, logo magnet, coasters that include conversation starters, and bookmarks, which are available for purchase or download at www.eatsmart.org. WSU Extension, USDA-FNS, and Washington State Dairy Council worked in partnership to create and review these materials. WSDC commissioned the artwork used for the Eat Together, Eat Better materials, and has a usage agreement with WSU Extension. Together, WSDC and WSU Extension shared the development and production of the Eat Together, Eat Better materials, with each taking a lead role for those items that would best serve their respective clientele.

**DEFINITIONS**

Research studies and articles in the media about family meals and family dinners use certain phrases that can have varying meanings. Here we offer our working definitions for “family,” “eat together,” “meal,” and “dinner.”

Families can be defined many ways since they come in many configurations of children and adults. For the purpose of this paper, a “family” includes all or most of the people living in the same household. This could be a parent and a child, the typical “family of four,” a foster parent and children, a grandparent or other relative with children, or unrelated individuals including a child. A child is in this configuration because the focus of the WSU educational outreach using
this material will be to parents and care-givers of children. We recognize that a “family” can of course include just adults, related or not.

Likewise, the word “eating together” may have different meanings to different people. Some parents have said that their families eat from the same pot of food but go to their separate rooms to watch TV and eat the meal alone. They have asked if that counts as a family meal or eating together. For the purpose of this background paper, “eating together” means sitting down together, generally although not necessarily at a table.

The word “meal” also has various meanings. For the purpose of this review, a “meal” can be breakfast, lunch, or dinner, consumed at home or away from home. “Dinner” is generally the evening meal but in many cultures and areas of the United States, dinner refers to the mid-day meal.

**WHY FAMILY MEALS MATTER IN WASHINGTON STATE**

Because the Eat Together, Eat Better project is designed for people living in Washington, we looked at data to find out whether family meals make a difference in the nutritional and psycho-social health outcomes of youth in our state. They do. We analyzed data Washington State students who completed the 2010 Healthy Youth Survey (the data set is available at [www.askhys.net](http://www.askhys.net)). A majority of students reported eating dinner with their families most of the time or always. Students in four grade levels were asked, “How often do you eat dinner with your family?” Responses could be: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Most of the Time, and Always. Students who reported “Most of the Time” and “Always” included: 76% of 6th grade students, 67% of 8th grade students, 60% of 10th grade students, and 52% of 12th grade students. These results follow the trends in other surveys showing that as youth get older, the frequency of eating with families decreases.

The HYS has been conducted biannually since 2002, so comparisons can be made over time. The frequency with which students eat with families appears to be decreasing. For example, among 8th grade students, in 2002, 68.9% ate dinner with their families most of the time or always, but in 2010, the percentage had dropped to 66.7%, which is a statistically significant decrease.

The HYS includes many questions about health behaviors, making it possible to explore associations between the frequency of family meals and frequency of other behaviors. Students at all grade levels who ate dinner with their families most of the time or always were more likely to practice healthy eating habits, including
drinking less soda, eating more fruits and vegetables, and eating breakfast more often. Also, they were more likely to have higher academic success in school (more A and B grades). Youth who ate with their families often fared better psycho-socially: they were less likely to report depressive symptoms and used less tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs. These findings in Washington State are consistent with what researchers have found in other areas of the U.S., and which will be described later in this review.

Because these data demonstrate that Washington students who had frequent meals with their families had better diets and were better psycho-socially, a reasonable public health effort by educators and health professionals is to promote family meals. Doing so can protect healthy habits among Washington State’s youth and families.

**FREQUENCY OF FAMILY MEALS**

**United States**

What does the research show us on how often families eat together? Answering this question varies on the ways that the question was posed. Some studies ask the respondents to indicate “never, seldom, most days, and daily.” Other studies ask the number of times during the past week that families ate together, and their ranges vary. For example, one study might ask for the categories “0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and 7” while another might have a different breakdown, “0-2, 3-5, 6 or more.” This makes comparison a challenge. Compiling many studies, one can roughly conclude the following about the frequency of family meals in the US:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrases used</th>
<th>Quantified</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Never” or “Seldom”</td>
<td>0 to 2 times/week</td>
<td>25 to 33%</td>
<td>Segment is increasing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Most Days”</td>
<td>3 to 5 times/week</td>
<td>About 40%</td>
<td>Relatively stable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Usually”</td>
<td>6 to 7 times/week</td>
<td>25 to 33%</td>
<td>Segment is decreasing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In general:

- The middle bracket of families who eat together 3 to 5 times a week, roughly 40%, appears to be stable. But the bracket of families that never or seldom eat together is growing, and the number of families that usually eat together is decreasing. In other words, kids who had “usually” eaten with their families dropped to “most days” and those who ate together “most days” dropped to “never or seldom.” These numbers come from a comparison of studies ranging from 2000 to 2011.
• Younger children eat with their families more frequently than do adolescents. Teens may have jobs, athletic and school activities, and involvement with friends that conflict with family mealtime.

• Depending on the study, it appears that 10-15% of youth never eat with their families.

• Race may make a difference. Caucasian families tend to eat together more frequently than Black or Hispanic families, and this is the case for older children as well as preschool children (Flores 2005). Asian-Americans appear to eat more often with parents than do teens of other races (Neumark-Sztainer 2010).

• Family meals may take place away from home, such as at a restaurant. Here again, there are cultural differences. Hispanic and Asian families eat out less frequently (Clusky 2008).

• Parenting style also makes a difference. “Authoritative” parents are more likely to provide the structure and support needed for family meals to occur. Authoritative parents are considered to be empathic and respectful of their child’s opinions, but maintain clear boundaries and expectations (Berge 2010).

• Mothers’ employment appears not to have an impact on the frequency of family dinners. However, it does reduce the amount of time women spend on cooking (McIntosh 2010).

• Family income appears not to have an impact on the frequency of family meals (McIntosh 2010).

• The priority placed on eating together has changed. Historically in the U.S., family meals were once considered an important or expected daily ritual that involved home-prepared food eaten at a consistent time with the entire family around the table. Many families today would regard this as an outdated notion (Burgess-Champoux 2009).

• Mothers’ attitudes about family dinner affect how often they eat together. Mothers who valued dinner were more likely to schedule and plan the meal (McIntosh 2010).

A few recent studies have noted an up-tick in the frequency of family dinners (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics 2011, CASA 2011). Some have wondered if the financial impact of the economic recession that began in 2008 prompted families to eat at home together more often.
When exploring the frequency with which children and teens eat with their families, it is also interesting to look at how often American adults eat with other people in their households. In a study of adults who live in homes that include other people (multi-person households), only half of them eat together (green segment in the pie chart below). More than one-third of adults eat alone (red segment) even though others live under the same roof. The pie chart on the left is for “primary eating,” which refers to sitting down for a meal as the main activity. The pie chart on the right is for “secondary eating/drinking,” which means eating while doing something else at the same time. For secondary eating, about one-quarter ate with household members, which might involve watching television, playing a game, or some other activity.

**Multi-person households, 2007**

*Information not collected on “with whom” activity occurred.  
Note: Data for individuals, age 15 and older.  

**Internationally**

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) conducted a study of child well-being in 24 so-called “rich” countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The study looked at six dimensions of child well-being: health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviors and risks, subjective well-being, and material well-being. One of the questions asked about the frequency with which 15-year-olds ate their main meals with their families. Because UNICEF used the question about family meals as an important measure of family relationships, the researchers were interested to
find any differences between OECD countries. Italy and France and several other countries ranked near the top, with 90-95% of 15-year-olds eating the main meal with their parents several times a week; the United States ranked at the bottom, with just 65% of the teens doing so. UNICEF used the question about family meals as an important measurement of family relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90 to 95</td>
<td>Italy, Iceland, France, Netherlands, Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85 to 89</td>
<td>Belgium, Norway, Portugal, Japan, Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 to 84</td>
<td>Sweden, Spain, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 to 79</td>
<td>Poland, Ireland, Hungary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 to 74</td>
<td>Czech Republic, Canada, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 69</td>
<td>Greece, Austria, United Kingdom, United States (65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center 2007

Similarly, adults in the U.S. are more likely to eat alone than adults in many other countries (right).

**TABLE FOR ONE**

Compared with people from other countries, Americans are more likely to eat alone at meal time.

**IN A TYPICAL WEEK, HOW OFTEN WOULD YOU EAT A MEAL BY YOURSELF?**

**PERCENT WHO SAID “EVERY DAY OR MOST DAYS”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The largest sample size for each country was 250, except for Russia (500) and the United States (1,000).

Source: Ipsos-Insight, 2003
NUTRITIONAL BENEFITS OF FAMILY MEALS

Healthier Food Choices Among the Five Food Groups

When children eat with their parents, they generally have more healthful diets. As they watch adults model eating habits, they learn to eat new foods, use table manners, and internalize what nutritious foods are good for their health. As nutrition educators guide families to consume appropriate amounts of the five food groups using ChooseMyPlate.gov, it is worthwhile to know whether eating family meals together has an impact on the consumption of these food groups. According to the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, most children and teens are overfed but undernourished: they do not consume enough from the Vegetable, Fruit, and Dairy food groups to meet their nutritional needs. They consume too many calories by making higher-fat choices from the Protein, Grain, and Dairy groups, and by consuming too much sugar, particularly from soda and other sweetened beverages.

Vegetable Group. When children and teens eat with their families, most studies show that youth consume more servings of vegetables (Burgess-Champoux 2009, Cook 2004, Larson 2009). Researchers offer various reasons for this finding. Some report that parents tend to offer both a cooked vegetable and a salad. Others say that when youth eat alone their dinners may include a food that they heat up (such as pizza or a prepared frozen single-serve item) that does not include a vegetable. Also, when youth eat out with friends at fast food restaurants, they are less likely to include a vegetable. However, among preschool children, a study found that frequent family meals had no impact on the young child’s vegetable consumption. In that study, if the meal was prepared at home from scratch rather than using processed foods, and if they saw other family members eating the vegetables, the preschoolers liked the vegetables better and ate more (Sweetman 2011). Vegetables offered at home may be limited in variety because meal preparers tend to serve vegetables that are acceptable to everyone, rather than experiment with unfamiliar ones. A study that explored this found that family members disliked so many vegetables that only certain ones (corn, peas, carrots, string beans and to some extent broccoli and cauliflower) prepared specific ways were acceptable. Corn was the only universally accepted vegetable (Wenrich 2010). Despite these caveats, children and teens generally consume more servings of vegetables when eating with their families.
**Fruit Group.** Some studies have found that when families eat together, children and teens consume more fruit. However, others have found that they eat more vegetables but not more fruit (Cooke 2004, Larson 2009).

**Dairy Group.** When parents are at the table and milk is available, teenagers consume more milk and high-calcium foods (Burgess-Champoux 2009, Larson 11/2006). Also, if milk is on the table during the meal, teen boys are more likely to drink it (Hanson 2005). Mothers have a particular impact on their daughters: when moms drink milk at meals, their daughters do, too (Fisher 2008, Neumark-Sztainer 2008). Not only do young girls drink more milk with their moms, their calcium intakes are higher and their bones are stronger (Fisher 2004). In a study of preschool children and their mothers, the children drank more milk at dinnertime than at other times of day, and they drank more milk than did their mothers. The study found a racial difference: the more sweetened beverages consumed by African-American women, the more their children drank milk. The authors suggest that these findings could be due to the mothers’ concern for their children’s diet quality. (Hoerr 2009).

**Protein Foods Group.** When children and teens eat with their families, they eat about the same amount of protein foods, although they consume leaner types of meat.

**Grain Group.** As with the Protein Foods group, children and teens consume about the same number of servings of foods in the Grain Group whether or not they eat with their families. However, when eating at home and with their parents, their meals include more fiber-containing whole grain items and fewer refined grains.

**Increased Intake of Needed Nutrients**

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines (DG) Advisory Committee, for the first time, was asked to develop recommendations for an unhealthy population rather than for a healthy nation, because too many Americans are overweight or obese. The committee also was asked to offer guidance on preventing childhood obesity. An additional area of concern noted in the DG is that 15% of Americans have been unable to acquire adequate food to meet their needs. Certain key nutrients are under-consumed and, the Dietary Guidelines advise, “Choose foods that provide more potassium, dietary fiber, calcium, and vitamin D, which are nutrients of concern in American diets. These foods include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and milk and milk products.”

One way to help families consume more of these nutrients of concern is through family meals. Research studies among children and teens have shown that family meals are associated with:
• More minerals, specifically calcium, iron, potassium, and zinc
• More vitamins, specifically folate, B-6, B-12, C, and E
• More fiber
• More lean protein
• Less fat, including saturated fat and trans fat


The nutritional benefits extend beyond the home environment. Not only are youth better nourished when they eat with their families, they make more nutritious choices when they are out with their friends and at fast food restaurants without their parents around.

**Increased Frequency and Better Quality of Breakfast**

The nutrition benefits of eating with parents extend beyond the dinner table. Children who eat dinner frequently with their families also make better choices for breakfast, and for most youth, this is when their parents are not present.

Breakfast generally is not considered a “communal” family meal, but rather a meal that members eat separately because of schedules or time constraints. One study found that the frequency of eating breakfast as a family was: 27% never, 42% 2-4 times/week, 15% 5-6 times/week, and 4% 7 times a week (Fulkerson 2011).

Kids who eat dinner with their parents are less likely to skip breakfast (Videon 2003). This has a long-lasting effect: in a study of teenagers, eating family dinners frequently was associated with eating breakfast five years later (Videon 2003). In another study of teens in alternative high schools, the more frequently they ate dinner with their families, the more often they ate breakfast (Fulkerson 2009).

Breakfast usually includes foods from the Grain, Fruit, and Dairy groups (Clusky 2008). Because of the important contribution of “nutrients of concern” contained in these food groups to the diets of children and teens, it is valuable that they eat breakfast, whether at home or at school.

**Obesity Prevention**

Most studies, but not all of them, have found that when children and teens eat dinner with their families, they are less likely to be overweight or obese. For this reason, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends family meals to prevent obesity (Barlow 2007). The “magic” number appears to be at least three family dinners a week (Hammons 2011, Sen 2006, Veugelers 2005). Part of the thinking
on this topic is that when families eat together, they consume more nutrient-dense foods, so the youth’s dietary intake is better. A better diet overall generally meals a lower risk for overweight and obesity. In addition, because children have a sense of belonging to the family, due in part to gathering consistently at the table, they may be less likely to overeat as a consequence of loneliness. This is particularly true for teen girls. Finally, if kids are eating at home instead of at fast food restaurants, they likely are eating more nutritious foods.

Yet, some health professionals offer cautions. If parents dish up larger portions, most children will eat what is served, whether or not a parent expects them to clean their plate. One study found that, while the nutritional content is better, most kids are also consuming more calories at family meals (Taveras 2005). If the television is on during the meal, kids may be unaware of their own satiety cues, “mindlessly” eating more food than they really need to satisfy hunger. And, while eating together may influence a child’s current weight, it remains to be seen whether shared meals influence their weight later on.

Race and ethnicity may come into play when evaluating the impact of family meals on obesity. In a study of children of several races, family meals were linked to lower risk for overweight among non-Hispanic whites than for Blacks/African Americans and Latinos/Hispanic Americans (Sen 2006). Another study also found that family meals seem to protect against obesity in non-Hispanic white children and non-Hispanic Black boys, but that family meals might put Hispanic boys living in low-education homes at risk (Rollins 2010).

Interestingly, it may just be all about attitude. In a study of mothers and their teens, if the mom had a positive attitude about family meals, the teenager was less likely to be overweight, even though the actual frequency of eating together was not linked to overweight (Mamun 2005).

Gender may also make a difference in the influence of family meals on weight. Girls in their early teens were less likely to be overweight if they frequently ate family meals, but the connection didn’t hold for early teen boys and older teens of either gender (Fulkerson 11/2008).

Teens in alternative high schools who reported eating five to seven family meals per week were significantly less likely to be overweight and food insecure than those who reported never eating family dinners (Fulkerson 2009).
At the other end of the eating spectrum, disordered eating appears to be less common among teens who eat frequently with their families (Hammons 2011, Newmark-Sztainer 2004, Neumark-Sztainer 2009). This is particularly true for girls: in a large-scale study of boys and girls from 9 to 14 years of age, girls who ate family dinners most days were less likely to initiate purging, binge eating, and frequent dieting compared to those who ate family dinners never or some days. Although a similar pattern appeared for boys, researchers were unable to draw conclusions because the number of boys with traits of disordered eating was small (Haines 2010).

The bottom line for researchers who analyzed 17 studies that addressed overweight, obesity, and eating patterns was that, “Children and adolescents who share family meals three or more times per week are more likely to be in a normal weight range and have healthier dietary and eating patterns than those who share fewer than three family meals together. In addition, they are less likely to engage in disordered eating.” (Hammons 2011) The authors went on to say that educational and public health initiatives aimed at promoting shared family mealtimes may improve nutritional health of children and adolescents, and they urged pediatricians to advise patients about the benefits of sharing three or more family mealtimes per week (versus one or none).

**Improved Nutrient Intake among Parents and Other Adults**

Family meals are good for parents, too! Parents’ diets are better when they eat with their kids: they consume more fruits and vegetables (Boutelle 2003). But if the television is on, parents’ diets suffer: they consume fewer fruits and vegetables and more fat (Boutelle 2003).

Young adults also benefit from eating with others. A study found that, when sharing dinner with companions, they had higher intakes of fruits, vegetables, and dark green or orange vegetables. And, they said that they enjoyed and valued eating with others. Young people who ate with their families in high school had a stronger desire to share meals with others after leaving home and establishing their lives as adults (Larson 2009).

Turning the focus to older adults, seniors are better nourished when they eat with companions, such as at a congregate meal site. Appetite can decrease with age, and having company can help. An additional advantage to meals at a senior center or meal site is increased access to senior services, which could include transportation to the site, information on dental care so that they can continue to chew and eat comfortably, and access to fitness and activity classes.
ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF FAMILY MEALS

Academic Performance

When children grow up eating with a parent, they develop a greater vocabulary because they hear a wider variety of words and have opportunities to ask what the new words mean. At the table, they gain practice expressing their ideas, which can give some kids greater confidence expressing their views in the classroom. There is a strong association between frequent family meals and getting better grades in school, in part because parents are more likely to know what is going on in the child's life at school, and may be able to help with homework or be aware of upcoming tests.

In a series of focus groups in Washington State with parents on the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program, parents were very interested in the developmental progress and academic success of their children. The Washington WIC Program planners used messaging to support this interest when designing an educational campaign to promote family meals (Johnson 2006).

Risk-Taking Behavior

Frequent family meals generally translate into lower use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana. Eating with the family is also correlated with fewer depressive symptoms and suicide. Studies have used family meals as a measure of “connectedness” to the family (White House Conference on Teenagers 2000, CASA/National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University 2006). Yet another study controlled for “family connectedness” and found that, even without feeling connected to their families, teens who had family meals used less tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana; had higher grade point averages; had fewer depressive symptoms; and lower suicidal tendencies (Eisenberg 2004). Authors of that study say that mealtime may be a time for parents, formally or informally, to check in with their teens. They also mention that girls are particularly sensitive to the nuances of family interactions, and the frequency of family meals might be more important to girls’ behavioral and emotional health than it is to boys. In another study by the same researcher (Eisenberg 2009), family meals had an impact on girls’ substance use but not boys’. Frequent family meals for girls was associated with less cigarette smoking, less alcohol consumption, and less marijuana use. No differences were found among boys.

Some of these gender-specific differences were echoed in another study: for teen girls, frequent family dinners were associated with less substance use and running away; for teen boys, frequent family dinners were associated with less drinking, physical violence, property-destruction, stealing, and running away (Sen 2010). Although there are gender differences in benefits, family meals are relevant for males as well as to females.
Positive Development

While some studies focus on the prevention of negative or risky behaviors in youth, others look at factors that help build positive traits. A framework called Positive Youth Development (PYD) views young people as resources to be developed rather than as problems to be managed. The PYD approach utilizes the Five C’s: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. Some add a sixth C: Contributions to self, family, community, and society. In a four-year study, researchers found that one of the strongest predictors of PYD was the child and his or her family regularly eating dinner together (Lerner 2005).

Parents’ Attitudes about Family Meals and Parental Role Modeling

Parents care about what their kids eat. In a survey of consumer trends, the Seattle-based organization Allrecipes found that more than half of parents were “extremely” or “very much” concerned about their children’s diets.

Parents believe that eating at home means eating healthier. In a study by the Food Marketing Institute, 92% of parents indicated that the food they prepare at home is somewhat healthier or much healthier than the food they eat when they are away from home.

Parents really do want to eat with their families. A large majority of parents who were surveyed say that dinnertime is usually pleasant and is a time to connect and
talk with the family (Boutelle 2003, Johnson 2006, Neumark-Sztainer 2010). This desire cuts across ethnic groups and income levels (Clusky 2008, Wenrich 2010). In a study of parents of teenagers, parents were asked to rank how important it was to eat together, and found that 98% either strongly or somewhat agreed that it was important. In the same study, they were asked whether eating family meals brings people together in an enjoyable way, and 97% either strongly or somewhat agreed (Fulkerson 2006). A multi-racial study found that most parents want to spend time with their kids—especially Black and Hispanic moms, and mealtime is viewed as a primary opportunity to do this (Flores 2005).

In focus groups with low-income Black and white mothers, most valued family meals and felt guilty when they could not provide them. Some moms treated family meals as a time to communicate with their families about daily activities and both good and bad times; they also used family mealtime to teach their children how to cook, to help them learn about nutrition, and to teach family traditions, values, and manners (Kling 2009).

Fathers’ attitudes make a difference. In a study of parents of kids ages 9 to 11 and 13 to 15, fathers who considered meals, specifically family dinners, to be an important family ritual had children who were home for meals, and were less likely to go to fast food restaurants (McIntosh 2011).

Youth show a strong interest in eating with their families. Both younger and older teens felt that eating family meals was important and that it brings people together in a positive way (Fulkerson 2006). In a study of youth with Type 1 diabetes, youths as well as their parents consistently perceived family meals as valuable and enjoyable (Rovner 2010).

Parents provide powerful models for children’s behavior. Many parents underestimate their roles as their kids’ teachers and role models. A survey by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics found that parents have more potential to influence their children’s behavior, including their eating habits, than anyone else. Children in the survey (ages 8 to 17) reported their mother and father as the people whom they admire or want to be most like (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics 2010). In that survey, kids said they would eat healthier if their parents ate healthy foods at home, according to 70% of white, 82% of Hispanic, and 80% of Black youth.

Children do observe what their parents eat and what they say about the food at the table. Children “copy” their parents’ food-related behaviors and absorb what they say about healthful food choices. When children observe a parent drinking milk at mealtime, they are more likely to drink milk, too (Fisher 2000). In a
study of preschool children, the greatest predictor of the kids’ fruit and vegetable consumption was their parents’ intake of fruits and vegetables (Cooke 2004). The family table is an ideal place for teaching and learning about healthy eating.

The act of eating together also demonstrates the value of the family meal. One study showed that mothers’ attitudes, whether communicated directly or indirectly, influenced the child’s attitude about the family meal. As mothers’ perceptions of the importance of family dinner increased, so did their children’s perception that eating dinner with the family was important, and the likelihood was increased that the family would eat together (McIntosh 2010)

**BARRIERS TO FAMILY MEALS**

Nutrition educators know well that the top reason that parents say it’s a challenge to sit down as a family for dinner is busy schedules. Surveys and research studies confirm that the lack of time to prepare and eat the meal, as well as conflicting schedules of family members are obstacles to shared meals. Both parents and youth agree that the major barrier to family meals is the schedules of not just the parents, but also of the teens who are busy with their jobs, sports involvement, homework, and hanging out with friends.

How do time pressures affect family meals? Mothers say that when they are too busy, they do not have time to plan dinners. Without planning, the family meal does not take place (McIntosh 2010). A strategy used by busy low- and middle-income mothers was to purchase food prepared somewhere else to bring home to eat, and sometimes to eat in the car. About 40% of mothers had more than five home-cooked meals in an average week (Devine 2009). Lack of time was the key barrier that prevented parents from sharing family meals and home-prepared meals, among the three ethnic groups surveyed: Asian, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white parents of pre-teens (Cluskey 2008). One researcher commented, “Busy schedules may be compromising the diets of American families, and one recommendation to families may be to slow down the pace” (Boutelle 2003).

Other barriers include:

- **Lack of cooking skills** or confidence in food preparation. If a parent has not been taught how to cook when growing up, did not learn cooking in school through a home economics or other program, he or she might not have the skills to prepare food at home.

- **Family members don’t like the same foods.** Some parents are tired of being short-order cooks and do not want to fix different things to cater to food
preferences of different family members. They may opt to let individuals prepare what they want to eat or go out as a family to a restaurant so that each person can order something they like.

- **Lack of planning** for the meal, so it is easier to go out to eat, pick up food on the way home, or let family members choose individually what they want to eat when they are hungry.

- **Competition with electronic media.** This arena continues to expand from just the television to mobile phones and electronic tablets that family member uses alone.

- **Don’t know what to talk about.** Some parents unaccustomed to family meals say that they do not know how to have conversation with their children and would benefit from tips on what to talk about.

- **Don’t have a place to eat together.** In a small apartment, there may not be room for a table, and dinner might take place on a couch in front of the television.

- **It’s unpleasant.** When parents who report seldom or never eating together with their teens were asked about the experience, a very high percentage said that it’s unpleasant because that’s where arguments take place. The arguments are often about eating (73%) or other issues (77%). However, in families that eat together four or more times/week, about 8% say that arguments occur during mealtime (Boutelle 2003).

- **Desire for autonomy** among teens (Neumark-Sztainer 2010).

  When working with families to encourage families to eat together more often, it is crucial to acknowledge and understand these very real barriers. At the same time, since most parents do value and enjoy eating with their families, they may welcome the opportunity to talk through possible strategies that might work in their own unique situations.

  Can promoting family meals do harm? It cannot be assumed that most or all mealtimes with family members have positive impacts on youth. A pediatrician wrote that communication from family members can sometimes be emotionally abusive, daughters may be susceptible to their mothers’ comments about their own weight concerns, and children may be adversely affected by the difficulties they face in trying to communicate with emotionally disengaged parents who are suffering from depression. The challenge of a family meal can be particularly difficult for single mothers earning a low income. Well-intentioned recommendations to promote family meals may come across as “out of touch” with life circumstances for some parents (Whitaker 2004).
CONCLUSIONS
Published research shows that frequent family meals are associated with:

• Increased number of servings of fruits, vegetables, and dairy. Same number of servings but leaner choices of protein group foods. Same number of servings of grains but choices include more whole grains.

• Higher dietary intake of fiber, calcium, iron, potassium, zinc, folate, and vitamins B-6, B-12, C, and E. Lower dietary intake of fat, including saturated and trans fat.

• Higher academic achievement.

• Lower use of cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol, and drugs.

• Lower incidence of depressive traits and suicidal tendencies.

• Increased levels Positive Youth Development traits.

While these associations exist, they are not cause-and-effect. It cannot be said that if a family sits down for dinner more often, the result will be that a particular child will receive all these benefits. Researchers admit that the reasons are still unknown. While many had thought that family dinners led to a greater sense of “connection,” which in turn meant better nutritional and psycho-social health outcomes, newer research suggests that there may be something else at play.

One possibility is that eating at home with family triggers positive emotions and less worry, and those emotions in turn trigger healthier food choices and more positive emotions (Lu 2011). Perhaps families that do sit down together may be families that already get along, may include a parent or parents who are empathic but have boundaries, have a routine that includes eating together, or some other characteristics that contribute to these positive outcomes. Emerging research suggests that mealtime interactions that include positive forms of communication are not just markers of how well a family functions but might also indicate some unique contribution to children’s nutritional health and psycho-social well-being (Fiese 2011, Fulkerson 2011).

RECOMMENDATIONS
Health professionals and child advocates agree: Encourage families to eat together.

• The American Heart Association’s consensus statement reads, “Have regular family meals to promote social interaction and role model food-related behavior.” (Gidding 2005)

• The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends encouraging family meals to prevent child obesity and build positive eating habits, stating “Encouraging
family meals in which parents and children eat together is an evidence-based way to prevent obesity.” (Barlow 2007)

• The Society for Research in Child Development advises, “Re-institute mealtime into family life.” (Fiese 2008)

• The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University advocates the family meal to prevent teen substance abuse (http://casafamilyday.org/familyday).

Since the benefits include both nutritional and psycho-social health, and since an array of child organizations that advocate for child health recommend it, there is strong backing to support promoting family meals.

The following recommendations are offered for educators and health professionals who aim to help families eat together more often:

• **Provide support, alleviate guilt.** Most parents truly enjoy family dinners and wish they could make this happen more often. Many feel guilty that they are not eating together as often as they would like. It is helpful to guide parents to think of strategies that work in their unique situations; for example, add just one dinner a week now, then, when they are ready, they can add one more.

• **Find the emotional “hook.”** With all the positive benefits resulting from family meals, there likely is one (or more) that resonates with a particular parent. It could be the desire to help a child do better in school, protect from substance abuse, consume a more healthful diet, prevent obesity. Help discover what is meaningful to that parent.

• **Aim for a commitment to make family meals a priority.** All the suggestions in the world will fall flat if the parent does not see value in eating together. The most receptive parents might be those who currently are eating together three to five (or more) times per week. It can be very effective to reinforce the value of keeping this pattern. And it may be more of a challenge to persuade a parent who did not grow up eating as a family and who does not find it important.

• **Acknowledge time constraints.** One recommendation is to advise family members to pull out their schedules and find out which nights then can commit to eating together for a certain amount of time, even if it’s short, and then follow through with this plan. It’s a good idea to stop doing other activities, and be at the table. Some busy parents multi-task in the vicinity of the table. Since mealtime offers an opportunity for conversation and role-modeling of healthful eating behavior, those benefits may not happen if parents aren’t there. Accepting the reality of busy schedules, one solution
might be to guide the parent to plan some longer time at the table when time permits, and others in which the family is sitting down together for perhaps just 10 minutes.

- **Strategize meal planning.** Parents indicate that the main barrier to eating together is lack of time for meal planning. They would benefit from tips to develop strategies that work in their busy family’s schedules.

- **Offer recipes and menu suggestions.** Parents appreciate recipes that can be prepared quickly (15-20 minutes), use ingredients that are inexpensive and that they are likely to have on hand, and that require minimal cleanup. Suggesting items to serve with the recipe is helpful. Aim for an easy meal including a serving from each of the five food groups: Vegetable, Fruit, Dairy, Grain, and Protein Food. Include nutrient-dense foods as much as possible (such as whole grains, lean meat, legumes, low-fat and fat-free milk). Small amounts of added sugars and fat can enhance the appeal of some of these foods, such as a touch of butter or oil on a vegetable or a sprinkling of sugar on fruit.

- **Encourage involving children and teens in shopping for food and meal preparation.** Children often enjoy helping to prepare the family’s meal, but some parents are reluctant to involve them because it may take more time and can create a mess. Youth involvement in preparing a meal is based of course on their age and skill level, ranging from tearing lettuce to slicing vegetables. Teens enjoy choosing recipes and preparing part of a meal or all of it. Delegating part of meal preparation to kids or other family members can help. If kids are taught safety in the kitchen and have some basic knowledge, a parent can let them know what they can do to get the meal started until the parent gets home from work or school. A goal could be for young people to learn cooking skills at home so that they are prepared to fix food on their own and eventually for their own families.

- **Help parents list a “top ten.”** Although many home cooks like to try new recipes, most have a fallback repertoire of a handful of meals they know how to prepare and that the members of the household will eat. One strategy is to help parents make a written or mental list of these menus and to keep as many of the ingredients as possible on hand. Then, when the parent is tired or short on time, the familiar meal can be easily prepared at home. This minimizes frustration, which can result in having individuals fend for themselves at the fridge or loading everyone in the car to go out to eat.
• **Provide options for dealing with picky eaters.** Parents, particularly those with young children, are often frustrated with the narrow range of foods that their children will eat. One strategy is for parents to role model enjoying a wide range of foods, offering healthful options with both a familiar/preferred food along with an unfamiliar/non-preferred food, and minimize reacting to children’s refusal to eat certain items.

• **Consider offering conversation starters.** Parents who never or seldom eat with their children, or who typically do so with the television on, sometimes do not know what to talk about. This can be uncomfortable and discouraging. Offer suggestions that are reasonable for their family. Encourage families not to bring media to the table (phones, hand-held electronic devices, laptops, e-readers, etc.) so that they can focus more on the food and each other.

• **Encourage flexibility.** Nothing is magical about dinner at 6:00 pm. Depending on schedules, family dinner may be early or later in the evening. Maybe dinner or supper doesn’t work but breakfast does.

The ultimate goal is to help children, teens, and their parents to share more frequent family meals. To do this, they need the time, ability to plan, cooking skills, and access to healthy food options. Educators and health professionals can assist them to find effective strategies in these areas that work in their own situations. With a desire to have family meals with each other and to have positive interactions at the table, families can indeed eat together and eat better.

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REFERENCES
The list below includes not only the references to articles cited in this background paper, but also additional research that may be of interest to the reader.


