

Building Connection, One Table at a Time:

How and Why Professionals who Work with Families Can Harness the Benefits of Family Dinners

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WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT FAMILY DINNERS?



Good for the body



Good for the brain



Good for the spirit
(or mental health)



BRAIN FOOD



Conversation around the table boosts vocabulary



Higher grades in school



Higher achievement test scores



More powerful than homework, art classes or sports



(Snow & Beals, 2006; Snow, 1983; Hofferth & Sanberg, 2001; CASA, 2007; Fiese, 2000)

DOES A BODY GOOD

- ✓ Consume **more** fruits, vegetables, protein, fiber, and vitamins
- ✓ Consume **fewer** fried foods, fatty foods, and soft drinks
- ✓ **Greater** likelihood of eating breakfast
- ✓ **Better** cardiovascular health in young teens
- ✓ Health benefits **extend** to young adults
- ✓ **Lower** rates of obesity and eating disorders
- ✓ **Reduction** of asthma symptoms
- ✓ **Fewer** calories



GREAT FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Lower rates of:

1. Stress
2. School problems, substance use
3. Eating disorders in teens
4. Anxiety, depression

Higher rates of:

1. Resilience
2. Self esteem
3. Kids feel more connected to parents

(Fulkerson, 2006; Berge, 2023; CASA, 2011; Eisenberg, 2004; Sen, 2010; Neumark-Sztainer, 2008; Utter, 2013; Elgar, 2014, Harbec & Pagani, 2018)

BENEFITS TO ADULTS, TOO!

The shopping, cooking, cleaning is a lot of work but...



Greater self-esteem



Better mental health for parents



Less dieting behavior



Lower levels of depression and stress



Healthier eating across the life span



Higher intake of fruits and vegetables

WHAT MAKES FAMILY DINNER SO PROTECTIVE AND EFFECTIVE?



Quality of mealtime is key but frequency matters too

Talking makes us eat mindfully

One of the few times of day to connect

The power of ritual

Provides a place to tell stories

CONNECTION



Kids who feel connected to their parents feel better

Catch problems when they are small

Parents know what's going on

Everyone gets a chance to speak and listen

Connection provides a powerful seat belt

IMPORTANCE OF RITUAL

Makes boundary around family

Time away from daily hubbub

Allows stability and consistency

Scripted and unscripted

Offers meaning and family identity



(Fiese, 2006; Fishel, 2015)

BENEFITS OF STORY-TELLING



The way we make sense of the world

Kids who know family stories are more resilient and have higher self esteem

Certain types of stories (lemonade from lemons) are extra potent

Helps kids feel connected to something bigger than themselves

(Duke, Lazarus, Fivush, 2008; Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2009; McAdams et al, 2001)

THE BENEFITS OF STORY-TELLING: STORIES YOU CAN TELL

Holidays or
celebrations

When you were
the same age as
your child

About an animal

Work or school

Overcoming a
challenge

A love story

Your name or your
child's name

A story about a
new city or
country

A funny story

WHAT IS AND ISN'T A FAMILY DINNER?

Any Two people, not everyone needed

Can include short cuts, take-out, NOT scratch food, organic, nor gourmet

Best not to have TV on but some gadgets are OK some of the time

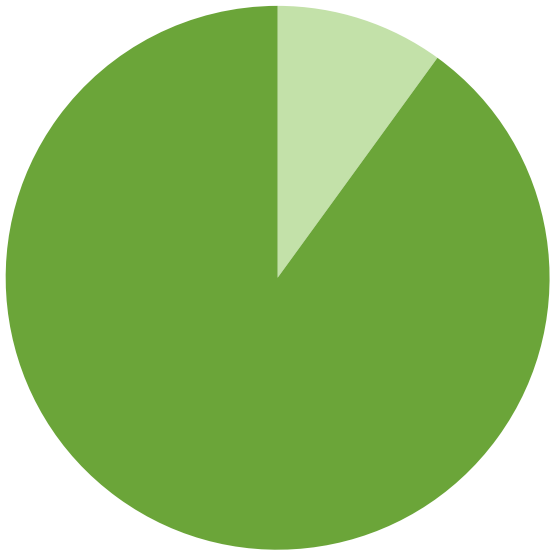
Talking better than silence

Don't be constrained by "5 times a week" research findings

It doesn't have to be perfect!

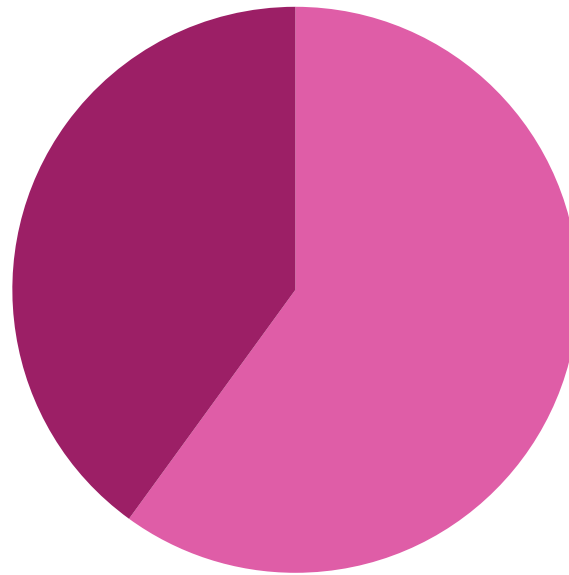
FAMILIES WANT TO HAVE DINNER

90% of Americans
want to
increase the frequency
of their family meals

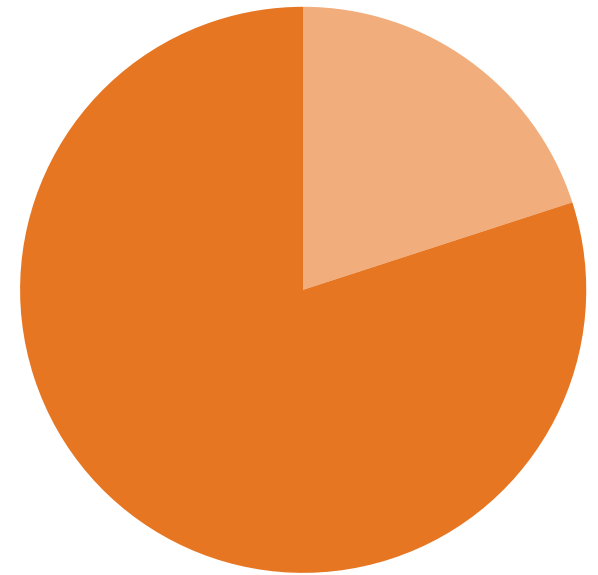


(CASA, 2007, 2011)

30-40% of families
have dinner together
On any given night



80% of teens
would rather
have dinner with
their parents



The research is the *why*
The Family Dinner Project is the
how



THE
**FAMILY
DINNER**
PROJECT.ORG



Food, fun and conversation
about things that matter

TFDP IMPACT: OUR NATIONAL PRESENCE



★ = past/current/emerging partner

Partners are core to our work | National Partners



**BLUE STAR
FAMILIES**



**NO KID
HUNGRY**



**common
sense**



AAFCO
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF
FAMILY & CONSUMER SCIENCES

**#GIVING
TUESDAY**



**Center on
Addiction**



MAYO CLINIC



**FEED THE
CHILDREN**



4 WAYS TO HARNESS POWER OF FAMILY DINNERS

- **Share** our **Resources** with Families
- **Ask Families** about frequency and obstacles
- **Host Community Dinners:** To foster parent-school connection; help families inspire each other; community building; to facilitate conversations among families
- **Offer Dinner in a Box:** Promote bonding and connection



Sharing our resources

DINNER TONIGHT & BUDGET FRIENDLY DINNER TONIGHT

THE FAMILY DINNER PROJECT

DINNER TONIGHT
Chef Nate's Sausage Fusilli

FUN
One person leaves the table. The others choose an emotion. When Person #1 returns, the family acts out the emotion and Person #1 tries to guess what they're feeling.

CONVERSATION
Have you ever seen someone treated unfairly because of what they looked like or where they came from? How did it make you feel? How do you think it made them feel?

THE FAMILY DINNER PROJECT

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GET TIPS AND TRICKS IN OUR MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

STARTING A FAMILY DINNER ROUTINE FOR BACK TO SCHOOL



Food
Summer's over and, with it, so is eating at "dinner" your family enjoys with the Carl's Jr.® Kids Cream Pie!



Fun
Get back to "school" with some classroom-themed family dinner ideas from Dr. Adam Tittel!



Conversation
Celebrate Father Day - or any day - with conversations that start about the power of love!



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION
Talk about it with us!

CELEBRATING THE SEASON WITH FAMILY DINNER



Food
Every November 28th makes a family holiday special. It's called dinner "night" that's good on its own, except it just has 30 more!



Fun
Try the new fun party mix!



Conversation
This month, brainstorm ways to give to others by asking "What's one thing that would make... happen today?"



INDEPENDENCE AT THE DINNER TABLE



Food
Enjoy summer's bounty with Teriyaki Teriyaki's Grilled and Fresh Strawberry Chicken Skewers!



Fun
It's the perfect season for some outdoor family fun. Make dinner for your family with a game of "Eat Your Veggies!"



Conversation
Taste the spirit of Independence and take home American bounty with these Recipes for Conversation!



RECIPE FOR CONVERSATION
Talk about it with us!

CONVERSATION STARTERS



WELCOMING TABLE RESOURCES

- Games to help with sensory, behavioral and feeding challenges
- Blog posts and videos that address special challenges raised by ASD, ADHD, trauma
- All translated into Spanish
- Holiday resources for families with special needs
- Brief versions of resources that are easy to share on social media or by email

Way to get kids talking at mealtime

- Rose, Bud, Thorn
- Two Truths and a Lie
- 20 Questions about a family memory
- Guess that Emotion
- Drawing Music



DINNER GAMES

ROSE, THORN AND BUD

Go around the table and ask each person to share the **rose** (the best or most special part of their day), the **thorn** (the most difficult part of their day), and the **bud** (what they hope for or are looking forward to tomorrow).



DINNER GAMES

DRAWING MUSIC

- Give each person a piece of paper and some colored pencils or crayons.
- Play a piece of music — preferably one that everyone enjoys!
- Challenge each person to draw along with the music, without lifting the crayon or pencil from the paper. The goal is to watch your own hands flow along with the music.
- When the music ends, stop drawing and share your creations. Notice how they're similar and how they're different!



DINNER GAMES

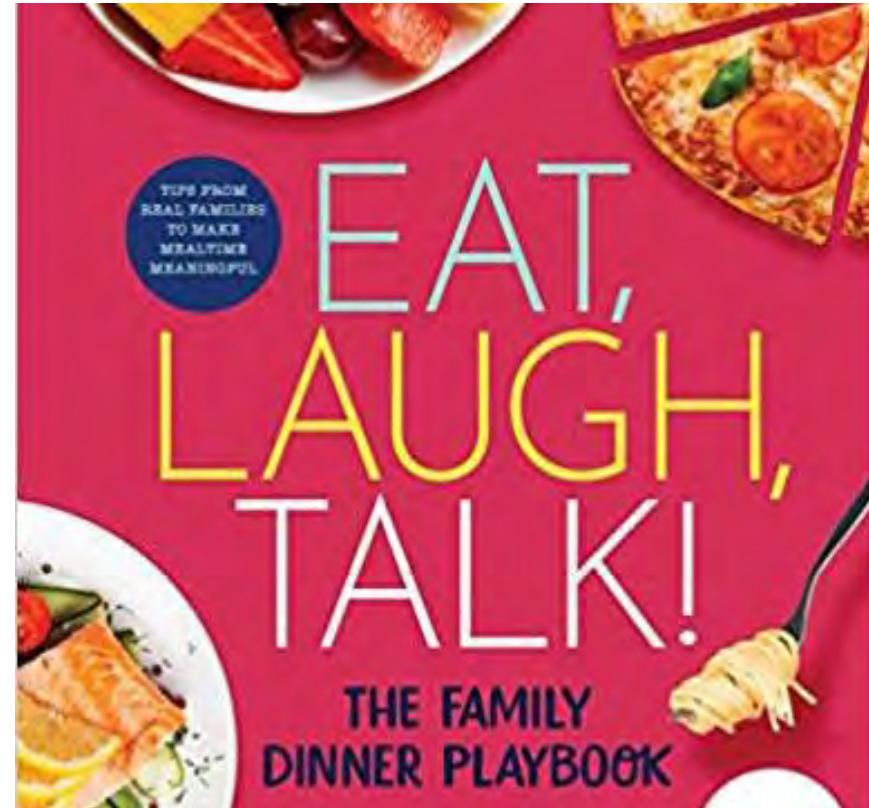
20 QUESTIONS: FAMILY MEMORY

One person thinks of a family memory. Then everyone has to ask questions to try to figure it out: Did it happen during a holiday? A meal? Was it a funny memory? Were there any friends involved? And so on, until you either guess the memory, or reach a total of 20 questions. This game also helps preserve memorable experiences by remembering and talking about them together!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES @THEFAMILYDINNERPROJECT.ORG

- The Family Breakfast Project
- Dinner and a Movie
- Youth Sports and Family Dinner
- The Family Dinner Project Thanksgiving
- Recipes for Conversation: Managing anxiety, resilience, mental health& self-care
- Boosting literacy at the table
- Nutrition/picky eating
- The upcoming election– Pizza to the Polls

CHECK OUT
OUR FAMILY
DINNER
PLAYBOOK





**What are common
obstacles?
Try these work-
arounds**

ASKING FAMILIES YOU WORK WITH

Like Pediatricians ask about safety belts and helmets

Do you have family meals? How often?

If not, why not? The Big 5:

1. Not enough time/Too much work

2. Too Distracted by Technology

3. Too much Tension at the table

4. Teens don't want to/Small kids won't sit still

5. Picky eaters

“WE’RE TOO BUSY”



Make double batches



Dinner Swap,
eg. Military families



Cook “quick food” like breakfast or lunch foods



Consider making Family Breakfast or a late-night snack an intentional meal



Most reliable time to connect



Push back on culture of busyness



Only takes 22 minutes

“WE’RE TOO DISTRACTED BY TECHNOLOGY”



“If you can’t
beat ‘em, join
‘em”



Playfulness
around
technology



Check all
devices at the
door



Use to share
photos, texts,
etc.



Use to verify
factual
questions



Agree on same
rules

“WE’RE TOO TENSE”



“Play with food: Raggedy Ann Salad, food collage



Prepare a list of meals that everyone will agree on



Go easy on teaching manners



Avoid topics that usually result in fights (e.g., grades or messy rooms)



Limit technology at the table



Parents and kids adhere to same technology rules



Laughter and feeling listened to are best antidotes



Play games and tell stories

“THEY’RE TOO PICKY”

Parents decide what, where, & when; kids decide how much

Get toddlers to try foods

Model your enjoyment

Play with food

Involve kids and make them stakeholders

Cut down on snacking

Rule of 15: Familiarity breeds acceptance

Don’t promise a benefit from eating a vegetable

Dessert is not a reward

One basic meal that can be customized

TEENAGERS DO WANT TO EAT WITH YOU

80% of teens would rather have dinner with parents (CASA 2007)

Dinner is rated high on list of activities for teens

Dinnertime when most likely to talk with parents

Teens have most to gain in terms of lowering high risk behaviors

YOUNG KIDS WHO DON'T SIT STILL

1

Lower your expectations— 5 or 10 minutes is fine

2

Great time to start the practice and good for young parents' marriage

3

Harness their energy

4

Play games like “would you rather?” or “I spy”

5

Involve young kids in cooking

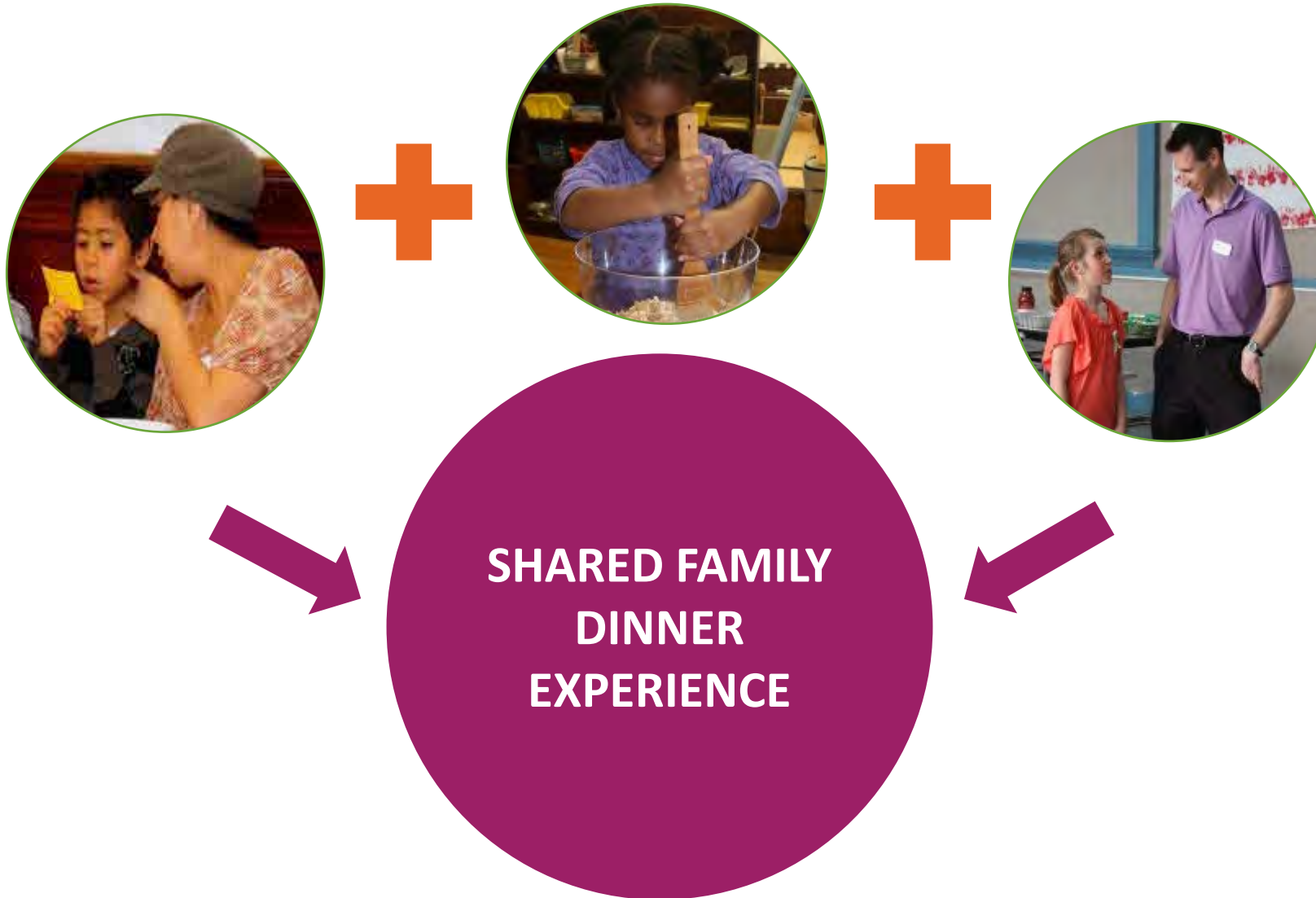
6

Have them make placemats with pictures of the family, favorite foods



Host a Community Dinner

COMMUNITY DINNERS



COMMUNITY DINNERS

Cook together:
guacamole,
salad and
lasagna

Play games:
rose, thorn,
and bud

Conversation
jars on the
table

Kids go off to
make dessert
and play
games

Parents share
strengths,
obstacles,
and solutions

CONVERSATION JAR



What is your favorite thing to do outside?



If you had superpowers what would they be and how would you use them to help people?



“A person’s a person no matter how small..” What does Dr. Seuss mean by this?



What will you miss most about winter?



Name two things you feel thankful for today



Which book character would you like as a friend?



What are 3 things you can do for someone who isn’t feeling well?



What is your earliest memory?

MGH Revere Teaching Kitchen Raising Healthy Hearts

Make your own face, car,
house, or landscape.

Eat whatever you make!





Dinner in a Box

DINNER IN A BOX



- Partner with emergency food delivery services, or food pantries, e.g. Montana No Kid Hungry and Idaho Office of Drug Policy
- TFDP resources that encourage bonding and enjoyment to accompany food boxes.
- Budget Friendly Dinner Tonight recipes, games, conversation starters, tips and Recipe for Conversations

DINNER IN A BOX PROGRAM- IODP

- Started during COVID
- Worked with Idaho FoodBank to distribute Family Dinner Night guide
- Online contest to share Family Dinner Nights
- Reached 15K families
- Ongoing partnership



DINNER IN A BAG: MASS GENERAL REVERE FOOD PANTRY

- 6-weeks of 4-5 resources each week of Games, Tips, Conversation Starters, Recipes for Conversation, Budget Friendly recipes, in Spanish and English:

68% Increased the frequency of mealtime

100% Had more and more varied conversation

100% Wanted to continue using the resources

- “Food as Medicine” plus TFDP resources: Food + Connection is great for nutrition and mental health



DINNER IN A BOX

- Food gets families through the door and makes them more open to other services.”
- “We want families to have something to look forward to when they receive their food boxes. We think that TFDP resources will show that someone cares about how they are eating.”
- “The best part for me was just how bright and upbeat the messaging was. All of the materials, while containing important information, looked fun and uplifting.”

THANK YOU!

If you have any questions, please contact
The Family Dinner Project:

Contact@thefamilydinnerproject.org