

Let's Eat—and Learn—Together!

Eating together as a family is an ideal way to build healthy eating habits. But that's not all that happens when you gather around the table for a meal. You also build bonds, and you can even help your youngsters practice skills they're learning in school. Use the advice in this guide.



Make time for meals

Is getting a nutritious meal on the table every night a challenge with your busy schedule? You're not alone! These tips can make it easier.

Plan ahead

Each week, talk about your schedule, and let your child write mealtimes on the calendar. It doesn't have to be dinner. If you know you're working late one evening, have him pencil in breakfast together. Share a picnic on his baseball practice. Or look forward to capping a hectic week with a Saturday brunch.

Find shortcuts

It's time to cook and eat. Skip the cooking part! Stop by the grocery store for a rotisserie chicken, microwavable "sides" in a bag, bread, potatoes, and a salad from the salad bar. Or make soups, stews, casseroles and casseroles on weekends, and freeze half to defrost during the week. Another idea is to set out a buffet of foods that you don't have to heat up, such as cold leftover chicken, cheese cubes, whole-wheat crackers, carrot and celery sticks with hummus, grapes, and apple slices.

Use teamwork

Involve your youngster in every aspect of family meals—from helping you prepare and cook food to setting the table and cleaning up afterward.

He'll gain experience following instructions and measuring ingredients. As he becomes more independent in the kitchen, his help will save you time.

Tip: Encourage family bonding by turning off the TV and putting silenced phones in another room during meals.



Introduce new foods

Inspire your child to try healthy new foods—and let her see you eating them, too. Then, for a fun math activity, she could graph family members' reactions to new foods.

1. Choose. Take her food shopping with you and pick out something new and unfamiliar to both of you, like amchi, bulgur wheat, acorn squash, or dandelion greens. Look up recipes in cookbooks or online to learn ways to cook what you select.

2. Try. Serve the new food at the start of a meal, when your youngster is hungry and more likely to try it. Encourage everyone to take some talk about the taste and texture, and what you like (or don't like) about it.

3. Graph. Now your child can make a graph with a column for each family member's name and blank rows to fill in how you said you felt about more foods. Have her record each person's opinion by drawing an emoji: 😊 = "Love it," 😐 = "Just okay," 😞 = "Not a fan."

4. Share. After a week, let her report her data: "More people loved acorn squash than anything else we tried" or "Bulgur wheat got two more 'Love it' smiles than dandelion greens did."

Tip: Don't give up on 😐 or even 😞 foods! Try serving them in different ways, and your youngster may update her answer with a 😊.

