

Balance Your World

Healthy Focused People
Attaining Sustainable Results.

with *Lynn Fraser*

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The Surprising Power Of Family Meals

By Lynn Fraser, The Practical Life Balance Expert

"How was school today?" you inquire of your teen.

"Fine," he says.

"Anything interesting happen in class today?" you venture.

"No, just the usual," comes the response.

You think about your next stab at a conversation while savoring another bite of your stir-fry.

"How about those Maple Leafs?" you swiftly change to a safer topic.

Whew! Is this how dinner table conversations go in your house? Or does your family even take the time to eat dinner together?

Dinner Deficit = Lower Grades, More Drug Abuse, Obesity and Stress

Changes in North American society as a whole over the past few decades have influenced the eating patterns of Canadian families. According to Statistics Canada, time spent with family for the average working Canadian has dropped from 4.2 hours per day in 1986 to 3.4 hours in 2005.

With Canadians spending more time working and commuting, sitting down together for a home cooked meal with the family is sadly becoming less common. Less than half of all U.S. children aged nine to 14 years report eating dinner with their families on a daily basis and 17% report never eating dinner with the family. Canadian families appear to be following their US counterparts.

Three 2005 studies – from Harvard Medical School, Columbia University and the University of Michigan – cite the family-dinner deficit as a contributing factor in childhood obesity, teen substance abuse, poor academic performance and increased household stress.

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Turning the trend around

Is there a strategy for quick, healthy meals without having to quit your job and come home to cook (and clean) for your family?

Planning quick, healthy meals and having the food in the house are two of the best ways I know to reduce meal-time stress. My favorite Canadian meal-planning books are the "Cooking for the Rushed" series. The newest one, "Dinner Survival" was released in 2008. Author and mother of seven, Sandi Richard, has meal plans and grocery lists for five, To-Die-For dinners-per-week. You can go to her website at www.cookingfortherushed.com, download the grocery list for the week, check your frig, freezer and cupboards for ingredients and then head to the store with the revised list. Half the work is done right there!

10 simple ways to make dinner an engaging family time

1. Eat dinner together as often as possible. Even 20 minutes is fine on busy nights. If you're not eating together now, start with once a week.
2. Turn OFF the T.V. Muting the commercials doesn't work in our experience! Turn ON some nice background music.
3. Smile. Laugh. (Even after a stressful day, 'fake it till you make it!') Ask questions. Share ideas. Comment on the weather, current events, the latest book or magazine article you've read, pets, TV shows, music and sports. DON'T talk about anything disgusting. You know, anything involving bathroom humor, vomiting, blood and gory stuff.
4. Have a backwards meal. Life is short. Eat dessert first! You kids will flip over this the first time you try it!
5. Invite Grandpa to join you for dinner (or Grandma or Uncle Bob or a friend)
6. Ask your offspring open-ended questions that can't be answered with a "Yes" or "No." Then SHUT your mouth and LISTEN!! I have a quote on my bulletin board, "Listening to a child doesn't really take much time."
7. Think of something or someone you are grateful for that day. Have everyone share their weekly/daily gratitude.

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8. Have everyone pitch in with setting the table, meal preparation, unloading the dishwasher and washing dishes. Chat about your day while you're doing this. Teens don't feel as "put on the spot" if you're not making direct eye contact. (this works best with boys)
9. Brainstorm ideas on how to solve a problem for a family member or friend.
10. Host an "appetizer dinner party" with friends. Less fuss + less prep time = more time with family and friends. Playing a game with a large group can be great fun!

Don't measure up? Not even close? Don't despair! Choose one of the above simple ways to make dinner an engaging family time and start using it this week. You will be surprised how connecting with your family really makes everyone feel better, eat healthier and reduces your stress. Not to mention the long term benefits for your children of higher grades, less obesity and substance abuse. Try it! You've got everything to gain!

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About the author: Lynn Fraser, The Practical Life Balance Expert, invites individuals within businesses and families to wholeheartedly lead enjoyable, healthy & focused lives. Visit her website at www.lynnfraser.ca

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