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**Make Family Dinner a priority.**

Family Meal Time – With everyone being so busy and all family members running in different directions, eating family meals together is often the last thing on everyone’s minds. But did you know that pulling everyone together for a meal four to five times a week has shown significant benefit – even regardless of what is being eaten? *Here are three surprising benefits to family mealtimes that may make them seem more worth the while, and some great tips for making them happen with your family.*

Improved learning. Young children learned more words just from listening to their parents and siblings talking during meals – in fact, it was found to be almost as beneficial as being read to. Additionally, teens who ate meals with their family were twice as likely to get A’s in school.

Healthier behaviors. There is a link between family meals and a lower risk of children engaging in risky behaviors such as smoking, binge drinking, marijuana use, violence, school problems, and eating disorders. But even more impressive is the fact that children and teens had lower rates of depression and felt more positive about their futures.

Better health as children and adults. Children and teens that eat meals with their families tend to eat a more balanced diet overall, have less symptoms of some medical conditions including asthma, have lower rates of obesity and have shown to eat healthier as adults.

Keep in mind that family meals are not a miracle solution to all your stress. Meals where family members are allowed to criticize each other or everyone watches television instead of talking do not provide the same support. But for most homes, it can open communication between everyone and help children feel accepted.

Still finding family meals to be a difficult thing to pull off?

Here are some great tips for making it happen without too much added stress.

- ✓ The family meal doesn’t have to be at night if everyone is busy; choose whichever meal works best for your family’s schedule.
- ✓ Don’t overthink what a “meal” has to consist of. Even if all you have time to prep for is a quick sandwich and some veggies, the goal is to simply bring everyone together.
- ✓ Meals don’t necessarily have to be eaten at the table, but keep the television off and limit social media use. Children who eat in front of a television or while on the computer have higher rates of obesity.
- ✓ Involve everyone in planning the meals. If your child wants macaroni and cheese balance it with fruits and vegetables. When you know what you are going to have, make your grocery list so you have what you need on hand.
- ✓ When you make a family favorite, make a large batch so you can freeze some for another meal.
- ✓ Don’t make planning meals harder than it has to be. Offer at least three food groups so your family gets a balanced diet, but it doesn’t have to be perfect.

Here are some quick and healthy meal ideas to get you started:

- *Scrambled eggs, toast & yogurt
- *Oatmeal, fruit, chopped nuts & milk
- *Tacos or taco salad with fruit & milk
- *Chili, milk & fruit
- *Sandwich (*peanut butter, BBQ, tuna salad, egg salad, grilled chicken, leftover roast beef, grilled cheese, breakfast sandwich*) with raw veggies and yogurt.)