

BACK-TO-SCHOOL SUCCESS STRATEGIES



Food

In the month of August, we're asking some kids and teens we know: "What back-to-school dinners make you smile?"



Fun

August 3rd is Esther Day, a day devoted to celebrating love. We're spreading the word along with our friends at This Star Won't Go Out and the Harry Potter Alliance.



Conversation

With back-to-school comes the old "how was your day" routine. Get Dr. Anne Fishel's best conversation tips to help your family get beyond "fine!"



With the flip of another calendar page, it's that time again. In some places, kids are headed back to class in just a week or two, while others will wait until after Labor Day; but either way, parents are planning.

Among the top stress points that families name when asked what keeps them away from the table is school-year schedules. But does dinner really have to be moved to the back burner (ha, ha) for two-thirds of the year?

Fortunately, the answer is no -- or at least, not completely. While there's always the chance that some evenings will really be so jam-packed that gathering the whole family for a meal is next to impossible, for most of us, it truly is possible to keep shared meals on the calendar. Here are some of our best tips to help you prepare for back-to-school meals:

MEAL PREP AND PLANNING IDEAS

Ah, September...even though the weather in many areas of the country is still hot and summery, our thoughts are already jumping ahead to fall leaves, apple picking, pumpkins, and sweaters. If you're a parent, you know that this is the month when the temperatures cool down, but the schedules heat up. After-school clubs, sports practices, music lessons, and all kinds of school activities like Open Houses and fundraisers start to crowd the calendar, often squeezing family dinners out of the picture. As challenging as it can be to hold space for regular shared meals, we all know that the benefits for every member of the family are too important to ignore. Try these tips to help keep family dinners on your calendar this fall:

PLAN YOUR MEALS.

Knowing in advance what you'll be making for dinner makes grocery shopping easier and helps to streamline the evening routine. Since you'll be able to make sure you have all the necessary ingredients on hand, there won't be any last-minute scrambling, and planning ahead also means that you can choose quick meals for the busiest evenings and save more time-intensive recipes for nights when you'll have those precious extra minutes to spare. If the task seems daunting to you, check out our meal planning article for some extra help, or if you're the techie type, try using an app like Ziplist or Paprika to help you stay organized.

LEARN TO MAKE FIVE FALLBACK MEALS.

The "good enough" dinner really is good enough, especially if it keeps you from heading to the drive-thru. Fallback meals are ideally dinners you can make in under 20 minutes, with ingredients you often have on hand. A quick dinner of spaghetti with jarred (or home-made, frozen) marinara, an egg scramble with vegetables added, quesadillas or wraps using your family's favorite fillings or whole-grain pancakes with a side of fruit salad are all examples of easy and tasty dinners that can get your family to the table in a hurry on busy nights.

More at
thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/back-school-back-dinner-table

MAKE-AHEAD RECIPES

See Recipes at
thefamilydinnerproject.org/tag/make-ahead

WHEN DINNER CAN'T HAPPEN (AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD)

One of the greatest things about family dinner is that it's available to everyone. Unlike many other ways to boost the health and well-being of the whole family, raise kids' grades and literacy skills and help defend against risky behavior like underage drinking, drug use, teen pregnancy and eating disorders, family dinner is something that you can do anytime right in your own home.

Except, of course, for those evenings when you just can't.

We get it: While family dinner really IS possible for many of us, most of the time (maybe with a little planning ahead), there are going to be times when getting everyone together at the table is an epic feat. For some families, scheduling crunches happen one or more nights during the week because of conflicting after-school activity schedules and work commitments. For others, the need to work evening shifts may make gathering the whole family for dinner a practical impossibility most of the time.

So when it just can't happen...should you give up on it altogether?

Absolutely not. The benefits of family dinners really boil down to the combination of three key ingredients: Food, fun and conversation. If you can create an experience that blends all three, then "dinner" isn't necessary. Here are five ways to share a meal when the schedule seems impossible:

HAVE FAMILY BREAKFAST, SATURDAY LUNCH OR SUNDAY BRUNCH.

FAMILY OF THE MONTH

This month, we're featuring Jamie Bero and her fiancé, Dr. Chadrick Browder. Jamie and Chadrick won our first-ever 21 Family Dinners Challenge for West Virginia residents, logging an impressive 58 family dinners in 60 days using our Dinner Tonight tracker. Despite busy professional and personal schedules, they manage to make dinner together a top priority.

While eating together five or more times per week is the most desirable goal, ANY regularly scheduled family mealtimes will help you gain some of the benefits of shared meals. Choose at least one that will work well for everyone, and make it a standing appointment for all family members.

SET ASIDE SNACKTIME.

Sitting down together to prepare and enjoy a snack – whether it's a bite after school, a pre-dinner veggie tray before someone heads out the door, or a dessert before bedtime – can be just as rewarding as having a whole meal together. When time is tight, make a ritual out of the small moments. You may be surprised how much you enjoy it!

GET CREATIVE ABOUT TIME AND SPACE.

If sports practice or other evening activities are standing in your way, why not bring family dinner along? Pack a picnic of sandwiches or salads and fruit, and get to the field a little early to eat and talk together. Or make sure everyone enjoys a light, early meal together at home before the activities begin, and make a healthy snack available later in the evening to keep hunger at bay.

More at

thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/dinner-cant-happen-instead/

Learn more about Jamie and Chadrick's dinnertime strategies at

thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/family-blog/real-family-dinner-projects-jamie-bero



LUCA'S PANCETTA PASTA



This quick and easy pasta dish is a favorite of Executive Director Lynn Barendsen's son Luca, who ranks it as one of the family dinners that makes him smile after a long day at school. Lynn recommends keeping the pancetta in the freezer, which makes it easier to dice neatly, and says it's important to serve this rich dish with a big side salad!



Instructions:

1. Cook pasta in boiling salted water. Stop cooking 1-2 minutes before the pasta reaches al dente – it will finish cooking with the rest of the ingredients.
2. Drain the pasta, reserving 1 cup of the starchy water from cooking.
3. Heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add pancetta and saute until golden brown and crisp.
4. Remove pancetta from the pan with a slotted spoon and reserve.
5. Add garlic to the pan and saute for 30 seconds to 1 minute, until fragrant but not browned.
6. Return the pancetta to the pan and add the pasta and remaining tablespoon of olive oil. Toss to coat.
7. Add the reserved pasta water and lemon juice and mix well. Cook for an additional minute or two to finish cooking the pasta through.
8. Add the chopped parsley and a pinch of crushed red pepper flakes as desired. Mix well and serve with grated Parmesan at the table.

Ingredients

Serves 4

- 1 lb. spaghetti, linguine or other long pasta
- 4 thick slices pancetta, diced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- Juice of half a lemon
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh parsley
- Pinch of crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
- Parmesan cheese, for serving (optional)



ORIGAMI LOVE NOTES

We first heard this idea from Lori Earl of This Star Won't Go Out. Make dinnertime fun, creative and meaningful by writing messages of love or inspiration on origami stars. Place them at different people's plates and read aloud to each other, trying to guess who sent each note!

Learn more about This Star Won't Go Out and their annual holiday, Esther Day, [here](#).

Get an Esther Day Origami Star template from Penguin Books [here](#).

thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/fictionary/

HOW TO AVOID ONE WORD ANSWERS

"How can I ask about school went without my kid shutting down and giving me one-word answers?"

Dr. Anne K. Fishel offers some helpful tips.

I don't know about you, but when I come home from a long day at work, I like to change my clothes, grab a handful of almonds (or cookies if it's been a particularly challenging day), and curl up with the newspaper. I'd rather not answer a whole lot of questions until I've had a chance to decompress. I think many children may feel something similar after a long day at school.

And there may be other reasons why kids are monosyllabic. It could be that they've been answering questions all day and now want a break, or that they're so hungry and tired that one word is all they can muster. Perhaps they've got a lot on their mind, and the question you asked isn't interesting to them. Or maybe they just don't feel like talking, but want your quiet company.

Of course, it's impossible to know if your child won't tell you, which is the Catch-22. Here are a few tips that have worked for me over the years with my children, and with child patients who are sometimes reluctant to volunteer information. I can't guarantee that they will always work, or work for every child. Only you know your child well enough to predict which, if any, of these approaches may help you and your child have more after school conversation.

- A hungry child is often a silent child. If he's running on empty, it's hard to summon the energy to tell stories about school. It may be best to hold all questions until he's sitting down with a snack.

thefamilydinnerproject.org//food-for-thought/how-to-avoid-one-word-answers/

- As your day rolls along, try collecting small stories that may interest or amuse your children, like something mischievous the dog did during the day, a funny exchange with a neighbor, or your worry about almost running out of gas. Then, when you reunite with your child, start with a story of your own. This kind of modeling often helps get the ball rolling, and means that you are offering something before asking for something.
- Keep a “map” in your head of what you know about your child’s day-to-day world, and ask questions that show you’ve been paying attention. After all, there’s nothing more maddening than answering the same question every day. Instead, ask a question that starts by showing that the details of your child’s life matter enough for you to have remembered them. For example, “I know that today was your first music class, what was it like?” Or, “Did you have a chance to play tag again at recess, like you did yesterday? Whom did you play with today?”
- Or, take a break from asking questions, and instead wonder out loud about parts of your child’s day without asking anything. “At noon today I was thinking about you because I knew you were taking your first test, and I was hoping that all the studying you did last night made you feel confident.” Then, just be quiet, and see if your child adds on to what you’ve started.
- Ask some questions that only require one-word answers, but not necessarily just yes or no. For example, “What did you like better today, math or reading?” “Who was most fun to play with today? And then who?” Sometimes, kids realize that they are offering information anyway, and decide to fill in more of the details.
- There is a saying I was taught in graduate school about how to make certain behaviors, like one-word answers, less attractive to patients. The saying is “Spit in the soup,” which means predict that someone is going to do the very thing that you wish they wouldn’t. The idea is that by suggesting the behavior, you may deflate some of its power. So, you might say, “Sally, I want to ask you about your day, and I know that you’re only going to want to give me one word answers, and that’s all I really expect right now.”
- And then there is the more direct approach. You can always ask your child to help you be better at having a conversation about their day. “I am so excited to see you, and so interested in what you’ve been doing, what you’re learning, who you’ve played with, but you often don’t seem to want to talk. Is there anything that makes it easier or harder for you to share some of your day with me?”

If your child answers, “Yes, don’t ask me so many questions!” you can wonder aloud what she might not like about your questions. If you figure it out, you may be on your way to changing the conversation.

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