

Staying Simple for the Season



Food

Make the most of convenience foods in a tasty recipe that will be on the table in under 20 minutes.



Fun

Make and decorate holiday cards or notes of kindness for others.



Conversation

Get the family talking about their favorite parts of the season!



It's hard not to overcommit ourselves during this time of year. Between planning holiday celebrations, shopping and gift-giving and feeling the pressure to "do everything" so we can make the most of the season, the whole month of December can easily turn into one big to-do list. In the midst of all the bustle, it can be easy to lose sight of the people we're doing all those special things for: our families.

We can't tell you to clear the calendar completely this month, or not to rush around from party to party and store to store as you check off the must-do items. But we can remind you to find some time to stop and take a breath while you spend a few much-needed moments with the people you love. Use the family dinner table this month as a place where you can all pause, focus on each other, and remember all the reasons you're grateful for the season. Here are some ways to keep dinner a sanctuary rather than a source of stress:

1. Make it convenient.

Home-cooked meals can be a wonderful part of the family dinner ritual, but sometimes taking a little help from the store makes sitting down together for a meal much more realistic. On busy nights, focus meals around relatively healthy store-bought options that can be expanded on to make a nutritious but quick dinner: Rotisserie chicken shredded into tacos, frozen vegetable potstickers simmered in chicken broth for a fast wonton soup, prepared ravioli and pesto served with a big salad. The extra minutes you'll gain will help you feel calmer when dinnertime comes so you can focus on the conversation at the table.

2. Make a wish list.

It's easy to assume that we "have to" do all the things that come our way during the holiday season, but more isn't always better. Use dinner as an opportunity to talk with your whole family about what really makes the season feel special to each person. Make a wish list together with one or two items that are important to each member of the family, and give yourselves permission to skip anything that didn't make the list. Maybe the kids aren't as devoted to the Elf on the Shelf as you think they are, or maybe your spouse doesn't care that much about the big party at work. It's okay to take things off the list to make room for relaxation.

3. Make it a celebration of its own.

A few times during the month, find a simple way to make dinner a special part of the seasonal celebrations. Try a Friday night pj party with pancakes and hot chocolate, a pizza dinner eaten while you enjoy a movie together, or a dessert-first dinner where the whole family pitches in to get some of the holiday baking done — and samples the results!

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/newsletter/staying-simple-for-the-season/>

No matter what, how, when and why you're celebrating this month, we hope you'll keep coming back to the dinner table as a source of joy and connection all year long.

REAL FAMILY DINNER PROJECTS: THE BUCK FAMILY



We're pleased to introduce the Bucks, a family of four who are committed to family dinners, despite busy schedules, because of the potential benefits to their children.

The Family:

Jamie and Sara Buck and kids Alex (13) and Katie (8). The Bucks live in Leawood, Kansas.

The Goal:

Sara says that the family has been learning about the importance of family dinners, especially the research that suggests that kids who eat dinner with their families perform better academically and are more resilient than their peers. They're trying to prioritize a sit-down dinner together at the dining room table three times a week.

The Challenge:

The Bucks share one of the most common challenges highlighted by families in our Real Family Dinner Projects series: Finding the time to eat together around the kids' activity schedules. Additionally, when they do eat together, it can be a struggle to keep things feeling fresh — although they plan meals and do their best to stay organized, the family can find themselves in a rut where they're eating the same preferred foods over and over again. Sara says "It's a struggle to find dinners we all like and aren't tired of!"

The Food:

8-year-old Katie sums up the universal family preference: “I have never met a burger I didn’t like!” In addition to trying new variations on their favorite burgers, the Bucks all enjoy an easy slow cooker recipe for Green Chile Pork, which they serve with tortillas and black beans. Sara says the method is to simply combine cubes of pork tenderloin in the slow cooker with canned green chiles, fajita spices and prepared salsa, then cook for about 5 hours for a fast and tasty family meal.

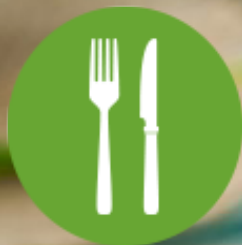
The Takeaway:

Although as kids get older and busier, it can be more difficult to make time for family dinners, Sara and Jamie are finding that dinner becomes more important to them as parents. “We really value this family dinner time as a ‘no devices, no distractions’ moment in our day when we can connect as a family...we have definitely seen an impact in having this connection time every night, and we can tell that the ritual of having dinner together makes our son feel loved and more secure during the tough teenage years.”

The Best Part:

Talking with each other and being together is the important part of family dinners for the Buck family. At this time of year, they also sometimes find opportunities to extend dinnertime into a longer bonding experience with a holiday movie after they eat. “We all enjoy eating together and it’s always an enjoyable part of our day.”

Do you have your own family dinner project to share with us? We’d love to hear from you and consider featuring your family! [Contact Us](#).



TORTELLINI AND SPINACH SOUP



Tortellini and Spinach Soup

Serves 6

Ingredients:

- 8 cups low-sodium chicken or vegetable stock
- 1 pound bag fresh or frozen chopped spinach
- 4 medium carrots, grated or thinly sliced (~2 cups)
- 1 onion, chopped (~1 cup)
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped
- Black pepper and thyme to taste
- 1 pound bag frozen tortellini
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Instructions:

1. Heat the stock to a boil.
2. Add the spinach, carrots, onions, garlic, and parsley.
3. Add pepper and thyme as desired. Let simmer for 15 minutes.
4. Add tortellini and simmer for another 3 minutes. (Do not OVERCOOK tortellini!!) Serve immediately.
5. Top with Parmesan cheese.

This recipe was provided by the Onondaga Cornell Cooperative Extension, from the [United Way of Central New York WIC Cookbook](#).



CARDS TO SHOW YOU CARE



Before dinner or during dessert, have your kids make holiday cards out of construction paper. They could be for other family members or for someone who might not usually receive a card during the holidays (like an older neighbor who lives alone). Placing an unexpected card in someone's mailbox can brighten up their whole day.

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/fun/dinner-games/cards-to-show-you-care/>



TALK ABOUT: HOLIDAY TRADITIONS



Get the family talking about their favorite parts of the season with this conversation starter!



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