

Parent *pages*

JANUARY 2011 • VOL. 10 No. 5
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Feeding body, mind and heart



A family meal that begins with a prayer, ends with a devotion and gently integrates faith into conversation is a powerful way to encourage spiritual development as well as create important family cohesiveness.

“HE TOOK THE SEVEN LOAVES AND THE FISH, AND HAVING GIVEN THANKS HE BROKE THEM AND GAVE THEM TO THE DISCIPLES, AND THE DISCIPLES GAVE THEM TO THE CROWDS.” (MATT. 15:36)

You are most likely not feeding a crowd of thousands—even at a family reunion—but given the pace with which we navigate our days, the thought of managing regular family meals may seem as daunting. After all, a meal is just for satisfying hunger, so if we eat in the car or eat in shifts, we accomplish the same goal. Right? Wrong!

Researchers have noted that because of the busyness of family schedules, fewer families regularly eat meals together. This has become a topic for concern especially given the greatly increased rates of obesity in children. The result of this research is a realization that families eat healthier when they eat together. There is less snacking between meals, and the meals themselves provide better nourishment—more fruits and vegetables, more calcium, fiber, iron and vitamins. Children in families that meet regularly for family meals are less likely to develop problems with weight or with eating disorders.

Arranging your schedules to require eating together as a family is well worth the effort. The family meal produces physical blessings as well as cognitive, emotional, and spiritual blessings.

“And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15).

The Bible contains many verses that use the word *feed*. These verses refer to much more than physical sustenance: *feed* is also used to denote cognitive, emotional and spiritual sustenance. Here we see how the family meal can mean so much more than a clean plate and a good belch. (Sorry mom, excuse me.)

Research also indicates that high school students who show high rates of academic achievement report having eaten regular family meals. Now you might be thinking that these meals required the reciting of multiplication tables and the preamble to the Constitution before the administration of dessert, but that is not so. There is an interesting connection between family meals and school smarts, and that connection is the development of language, working memory and problem solving skills.

Children develop language skills by engaging in sustained conversation. With a family meal, you have a captive audience for generating discussion. Children hear

new words and try them. They have an opportunity to think about what's relatable to them instead of merely answering questions. When sharing the day's happenings is modeled for children, they learn to save stories for retelling at suppertime. Even the very young child will soak up language while peaceably munching on green beans.

In addition to developing the ability to use language, children are also strengthening their working memory while listening to others and commenting on their stories. Working memory is an essential tool for academic learning and for problem solving. It's the ability to juggle bits of new and old information and to use them together to learn. A child, listening to a sibling's story of a recess problem and then commenting on a solution, is practicing learning skills that apply to every kind of cognitive development. This activity has great benefit because it happens repeatedly. In this way, table conversation that happens regularly over a period of years does more to develop intellect than even the coolest computer program.

“When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, ‘Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon’” (Gen. 43:16).

Note that Joseph chose to eat with his brothers before mentioning his willingness to forgive. He wanted to see how they treated their brother, Benjamin. He wanted to see if the family from which he was sold had learned to respect the family bond. Family meals can be messy—food is spilled, feelings stepped on, and patience worn dangerously thin. Family meals are an example of how we as a Christian family live together, forgive each other and are blessed by our interrelationships.



The conversation, storytelling and sharing of concerns that happens during family time teach children much about the gifts God gives us for living the life of a saint and sinner in a sinful world. One of the most important skills learned is one that happens after a family disagreement. Children learn that no matter what happens, the family comes back together for the next meal. Families learn to practice unconditional love.

“But he answered, ‘It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matt. 4:4).

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When families discuss the daily happenings and stories from the past, parents model discussion and the use of discernment. Stories that relate real events are not perfect stories and are open to discussion about how things were handled and how they could have been handled. This regular sharing strengthens the family relationship as you see each other as forgiven sinners. Children who learn that their parents struggle with daily issues learn how to rely on God for answers to tough life problems.

They also learn that God uses this kind of struggle to lead them to His word and grace.

For Discussion:

- ▶ What do you remember of family meals when you grew up?
- ▶ What are the good things that happen during your current family meals?
- ▶ Make a list of skills that nurture empathy (sharing the last roll, taking turns telling stories, etc) learned and practiced during a family meal.
- ▶ What is lost when family members eat in the car, or eat alone?
- ▶ How is the act of fixing a meal a demonstration of love and care for the family?

For Further Study:

These sites give further tips and links to research on the health benefits of family meals.

- ▶ <http://family.samhsa.gov/get/mealtime.aspx>
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