

Making the Time to Share A Meal – or Even a Healthy Snack

We all live in such a fast-paced, action-oriented busy culture. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. It can be enriching and fun and even energizing. But that same culture can also sneak-up on us and take over our lives, eating-up all our time with "busyness". And the scary thing is we may not even notice! We can get to the end of a day and realize we haven't had a good conversation with anyone, including our children. We realize we've been busy all day, we haven't stopped even for a minute. Most of us would agree, we're not really comfortable with all this busyness. Somehow, it doesn't seem like a healthy, balanced way to live. But we're also not quite sure how to get ourselves and our families out of this busy lifestyle.

In her book, The Shelter of each Other, Mary Pipher talks about the need for families to be conscious of how we can "protect our time." because "time shelters families." Families can limit activities, or build-in "family time". Families could even turn off all the "electronics" and see what happens . . . OK, that might be a little extreme, but it sure could be interesting, especially as children get older!

Another way to protect time as a family is to share a meal together. It doesn't have to be every day – it doesn't even have to be a whole meal! What's important is that we "protect the time" so that we sit and share food together as often as we possibly can. Protecting family time is not the only benefit of sharing a meal or an evening snack together. Research is showing that there are many positive effects associated with simply sitting down together and sharing food.

As part of the work of the Arlington Public School Comprehensive School Health Committee, the Department of Human Services, School Health Bureau (school nurses and clinic aides are part of the School Health Bureau) has pulled together lots of research on the benefits of eating together as well as great practical ideas for having a pleasant meal together. The excellent brochure they've created will be available very soon but in the meantime, these positive effects of eating together may inspire you to carve out just one more meal/snack time together! Research shows families who eat together tend to:

- Communicate better.
- Build strong family relationships.
- Develop a strong sense of identity and belonging.
- Eat healthier meals.

Children in these families tend to:

- Feel better about themselves.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Improve school work and get better grades.
- Create healthy relationships
- Avoid poor eating behaviors

You have to admit, that's a lot of bang for the buck! It probably shouldn't surprise us, because people have valued and even "made sacred" sharing food together as far back as we can go. In the best of all worlds sharing food together brings harmony.

Unfortunately, in our real everyday world, harmony at meal times can be hard to come by. Much as we want our families to sit together sharing healthy food and discussing interesting ideas and telling funny stories, that's not how it works out all the time. But it's OK – like everything else families do, this sharing food together is a learning and growing process. It's one more example of all you can learn just by being in a family.

Eating together, children can learn to be:

- Good listeners. They'll see how attentively you listen to them and try hard to do that too. Children can learn you sometimes have to wait to talk, *but you will get a turn.*
- Good conversationalists. They'll learn their opinions and ideas are important and valid because you'll be asking for their ideas and opinions. They'll learn how to share their ideas and opinions in a respectful way, because you do that too.
- Empathetic. In listening to their parents, their siblings, other family members or friends they'll learn to feel the sad or frustrating times as well as the funny and happy times. Children really are interested in what their parent's lives are all about, so don't forget to share some part of your life too.
- Healthy eaters. Children who eat with their families can learn about a wide variety of foods and also learn you don't have to like everything and you don't have to eat everything. With a little thought, families can provide enough choices so children get a healthy balanced meal – at least most of the time!

So don't despair when the milk spills or no one likes the beets or the interesting discussion disintegrates into an annoying argument. Children and teens are still learning and still becoming the best they can be. Through your on-going efforts to gather everyone together to share a meal or a snack, you're giving your children lots of opportunities to do just that – become the best they can be!