

The Benefits of Eating Together For Children and Families

Today's busy lifestyle can make eating together a challenge, but it's worth the effort it takes. There are nutrition, health, social, and mental benefits to eating with others. Here are some tips and strategies to help you get started.

Schedule Time to Eat Together

- Eating together can happen at breakfast, lunch or dinner. Choose the meal that gives you the most time to talk and connect.
- If you don't usually eat together, start by scheduling one meal per week and increase the number as you are able.
- Circle your friends and family around healthy foods as often as you can. The more you eat together, the more you benefit.
- Try to schedule activities so that they don't interfere with mealtimes. If that's not possible, create a meal together around a picnic table in a park on the way to piano lessons or rink-side before hockey.

Tip: Once you decide what meal you are going to eat together, mark it on your calendar like you would any other event. If you have a plan, it is more likely to happen.

Everyone Can Help Plan & Prepare Meals

- Eating together is more likely to happen when everyone helps.
- Involve kids of all ages in planning, shopping for and preparing meals. These are important life skills that can help us eat well.
- Children and others new to the kitchen can help in the following ways: take foods out of the fridge or cupboard, tear up lettuce for a salad, sprinkle cheese on a pizza, help wash fruits and vegetables, layer fixings in a sandwich, or put muffin liners in the pan.

- Kids with more experience in the kitchen can do the following: crack eggs, toss a salad, measure ingredients, stir ingredients in a bowl, put batter into muffin tins, roll balls of cookie dough and put them on the baking sheet, or pick herbs from the garden.
- Children are more likely to eat the foods they help you to prepare.
- Cooking together is a great way to connect with each other and have fun!
- Use a combination of fresh ingredients and ready-made foods to make fast, easy meals. Over time, make more from scratch. Remember, the meal doesn't have to be perfect. It's the time together that's important.
- Cooking is a great time to teach about food safety. Remind children to wash their hands before and after preparing food, to wash vegetables and fruit before eating, and not to mix ready-to-eat foods with foods that need to be cooked.
- Cooking together is also a great way to teach kids about kitchen safety. Always supervise their activities. Getting burned or cut puts an end to the fun fast!

Tip: If you aren't confident in the kitchen, choose simple and familiar recipes. This will help you enjoy your time together instead of trying to figure out the next step in the recipe.

Make Mealtimes about Being Together

- Eating together provides a time to be connected. This helps children feel loved, safe and secure.
- Focus on enjoying each other's company, not on what or how much each child is eating.
- Use meal times to teach children about family values and traditions.
- Keep mealtime conversations positive. Encourage children to talk about their

day. This helps to develop more communication between family members.

- Schedule difficult or disciplinary conversations for some time other than meals.

Tip: Turn off distractions like the TV, computer, tablets and phones during mealtimes. Keep toys and books off the table.

Model Positive Eating Behaviour

- You are an important role model for good table manners, trying new foods, and enjoying mealtimes. Children and youth are more likely to eat foods their parents and family also enjoy eating.
- Make offering new foods part of your regular mealtime routine. Children often need to see, smell, and touch a food many times before trying it. Offer new foods with familiar foods and include foods your child has refused in the past.
- Not everyone likes every food, and that's okay. Encourage kids to say "no, thank you," or teach them what you would like them to do or say if they don't want to eat something.
- Trust children to show or tell you how much they want to eat and when they are finished eating. An important part of healthy eating is learning to stop when they are full. Being forced or pressured to finish food can make your child ignore their internal hunger and fullness cues.
- Try not to rush children through a meal. Children often take longer to eat than adults. Remind children to eat slowly, chew their food well and enjoy what they are eating.

Health and Social Benefits to Eating Together

- People of all ages eat better when they share a meal with others. They tend to eat more fruits and vegetables and other nutrient-rich foods. They also eat less pop and fried foods.

- Eating together gives young children the chance to learn more words and how to communicate better.
- Other benefits for kids and teens include:
 - healthier eating into adulthood
 - healthier body weight
 - lower risk of disordered eating
 - less use of cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol
 - fewer behaviour problems and decreased early sexual activity
 - better self-esteem and less depression
 - better grades and higher scores on achievement tests at school
- The benefits of eating together are greatest if you don't eat in front of the TV and other screens.

For More Information

There are local and national resources to help you get started:

- Better Together: www.bettertogetherbc.ca. Check out 'Blog' and 'Kid-Friendly Recipes' to get you excited about cooking together, and 'Learning' to discover tips, resources and ideas for overcoming challenges.
- Family Kitchen: www.familykitchen.ca. Check out the 'Getting Started' for steps to success, and 'Recipes & Ideas' for beginner, intermediate and advanced-level cooks.
- The Ellyn Satter Institute: www.ellynsatterinstitute.org. Check out Master Family Meals Step By Step for information on how to make family meals healthy, positive experiences for all family members.

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For more information about healthy eating and nutrition, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthy-eating or call **8-1-1** (toll-free) to speak with a registered dietitian. For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.