Making the most of family mealtimes

Between work, school, dropping kids at swimming practice, responding to a gazillion e-mails, commuting, grocery shopping and housework, it's no wonder that more and more families are having trouble sitting down together for an old fashioned "family meal." Though it may take some planning and re-jigging of schedules, the payoff is well worth it: several studies indicate that children who eat meals with their family tend to eat healthier, be happier and even get better grades at school. Below are some creative ways to help you find the time to eat together and maximize its value when you do:



Make eating together part of your routine. You'd be sure to get your child to a doctor's appointment on time, so make the same effort to get everyone together for dinner (or breakfast) on a regular basis.

If you are running a little late be flexible. Offer children a healthy snack to tide them over and be prepared to adjust meal times to events going on in your lives. This may mean that, at times, breakfast becomes the family meal of the day. The important part is that the family is together and communicating.

Turn off the TV, computer and radio and let the answering machine pick up telephone messages. Keep the focus on talking and sharing as a family. Create a routine where everyone at the table has the chance to talk about their day. You'll probably pick up some useful information from your children about their friends, school or interests. Open dialogue between adults also gives kids a glimpse into the world of "grown up" conversation.

Put your family first. Making room for quality family time doesn't always have to involve a "home-cooked" meal. If you're pressed for time, order take-out. Try, though, to maintain your dinner "communication" routine.

Enforce good manners. Establish your dinner table as a "no fighting or whining" zone and encourage your children to practice please, thank you and other courtesies. Remember, the easiest way to teach kids about dining etiquette is to be a model of polite eating habits.

Encourage children to lend a hand at meal time. Children will enjoy the meal more if they feel that they've share in preparing it. Older kids can help with meal preparation while younger children can pitch in by setting the table or folding napkins.

Try to serve one food that is your child or children's favourite. Not only will it ensure that your children will eat something, it also makes them feel that their preferences are valued.

Don't force children to "clean their plate." Yes, there are children starving around the world, but this strategy often creates a power struggle between parent and child and can set up negative eating patterns. Allow children to eat until they've had enough.

While it may be impossible to get everyone together for a meal everyday, with a little flexibility and foresight, your family can create consistent meal times that nourish your family's appetite for delicious food and meaningful conversation.