

**FAMILY MEAL TIMES**

The family meal time is one of the most valuable routines to establish in the life of a family. Research has proved that children who eat at least one meal a week with their families benefit greatly in terms of social skills and acceptance of shared responsibilities. They learn simply and directly through their own experience, the importance of family interaction and the value of close friendship, support and loyalty.

In theory and with practice, a shared meal can be the setting for peaceful conversation and allow each family member the opportunity to talk about his/her day, and possibly to discuss any problems or issues. Successful family meal times are primarily about talking and communication. In the modern age of 24 hour TV, computer games and computer social networking sites — the fact is that it is often easier to eat alone rather than together. Furthermore, if parents fail to establish these routines whilst their children are young it is very hard to implement them when the kids become teenagers. But it is not impossible. There are various strategies available for promoting shared family meals.

It is of first importance that every family member should be made to understand the possible benefits; namely that our lives really can be better in general if we make the effort to communicate more effectively. Next step — a weekly meal together can be set as a realistic first goal. The meal should be quite a tasty and popular one as an inducement to keep the kids away from computers and TV sets!

It is important that shared meals should not be the setting for trying to deal with family disputes. There will always be arguments from time to time — even in the happiest and closest families. But these should be kept away from the dinner table if possible. Parents are encouraged to set the tone by example. Light hearted banter, stories about the day and a joke or two can help set the tone. They can also help by being attentive listeners and appropriate responders. Successes should be marked by congratulation and bad news supported with commiseration. Quieter family members should be encouraged by asking what their opinion is on something, rather than about what they did or failed to do. It makes them feel more important and valued. Sometimes a good start can help a simple family meal go on to be a really enjoyable or even memorable experience.

The next stage in building this routine can be to introduce more days. In our experience the best place to start is Sunday lunch. The second might be to establish Wednesday nights as family meal time. Of course the most important thing is flexibility. This and a bit of effort are required to set up helpful routines but the pay back can be immense for a family.

Dinnertime family routines, especially if established early on, have all kinds of other potential benefits. For example children can be encouraged to prepare one course (possibly on an agreed rota): they might even be encouraged to compete to produce maybe an exceptional soup or a truly sensational desert! This can be good fun.

Once established, family meal routines are also great for developing good table manners and "work" habits. Children can learn to set the table, help with clearing up and generally build good patterns of co-operation with their parents, friends and the people they meet with in daily life.

The next stage in building a meal sharing routine is to...

1. ...introduce as many days as possible.
2. ...introduce cookery competitions.
3. ...add Wednesday night to the schedule.
4. ...be persistent and more flexible.