

THE CASE FOR THE FAMILY MEAL

It can seem like one more to-do, but with a little creativity, you can tap into this powerful antidote to your overscheduled life.

by KATE ROPE

MARY-KATE STARKEL AND HER HUSBAND, WILL, always planned to eat together when they had a family. Growing up, Will had had a homemade meal on the table every night, and he assumed the same would happen when he became a father. When Mary-Kate was a girl, her mom worked hospital shifts that made family dinnertime almost impossible. She wanted to finally experience it with her own children.

Once their daughter Maggie came along, all went according to plan—until Maggie turned 3 and mealtime in the family's home in Atlanta fell apart. "She wouldn't sit or stay seated at the table. She was banging her fork all over the place, yelling over the top of us to be heard," says Mary-Kate. "It was legitimately hell." One night, Will asked Maggie if she would like to help light a candle for the table. "She thought that was about the biggest deal

in the world that she would be allowed to help with the match and put the candle near her," says Mary-Kate. "We turned off the lights, and it was an immediate lull in crazy."

The Starkels lit candles nightly after that. "It brought a sense of calm and focus and makes the time feel special, even when it's a hectic school day and all we're having is spaghetti," says Mary-Kate.

THE FAMILY DINNER, LONG HELD UP AS ONE OF THE most meaningful of household rituals, has taken a bit of a battering in recent years. Blame the madness of our modern schedules—the explosion of extracurriculars and disintegrating boundaries between home and work—and the proliferation of fast food and meals on the go. With all we are balancing, putting food on the table and stopping to sit down and eat it together can seem like a Herculean,

Studies link regular family dinners with better grades and higher self-esteem.





almost impossible accomplishment. The irony is that it also offers one of the best antidotes we have to the crush of our crazy lives, giving us time to slow down, put the devices away, and connect in person. A rare opportunity to look each other in the eye and find out how we are all doing. A moment to breathe.

And dozens of studies suggest it's the secret sauce to many of the worries we have as parents. Kids who frequently eat dinner with their families are more likely to be slimmer and consume less soda and fewer high-fat foods and fried foods. In one study, teens who dined with their parents between five and seven times weekly were twice as likely to bring home A's and B's compared with peers who had fewer than three family dinners a week. And family meals pay off for parents too, offering them a window into their children's lives, helping

relieve stress, and saving money. Based on the typical restaurant markup, \$5 spent on ingredients for dinner at home turns into \$15 if you have the same dish at your favorite bistro or Mexican joint.

Like the Starkels, many parents are trying hard to make family dinners happen. Eight in ten participants in a Brookings Institution survey reported eating together at least once weekly, and more than a third said they managed to make it to the communal dinner table seven nights a week.

Yet many of us are clearly running into obstacles. An overwhelming number of Americans say they don't like to cook or are so-so about it—some 90 percent, according to an article in the *Harvard Business Review*—and in 2018, we spent \$256 billion on fast food, up from \$160 billion in 2002, not accounting for inflation. While the French devote more than two hours a day to eating and drinking,

in the U.S., we barely log an hour at the table. Americans eat more packaged food per person than almost all our counterparts. For many families, the conflict that can come with getting everyone together (bickering over bites of broccoli, sibling rivalry, or the Great Device Battles) can whittle away any motivation we have to make meals happen.

And then there's the fact that the family meal has always fallen squarely on the workload of the American mom. According to Sarah Bowen, coauthor of *Pressure Cooker: Why Home Cooking Won't Solve Our Problems and What We Can Do About It*, most moms report that they are the only—or the main—person responsible for getting food on the table.

IT ALL STARTED WHEN THE PARENTS OF THE LATE

19th century, who finally had dining rooms to eat in, began holding regular family meals. The practice caught on, and during the post-World War II economic boom, shows like *Leave It to Beaver* in the late 1950s and early 1960s introduced a picture of what a happy family looked like sitting down to a meal made by Mom. In fact, Hugh Beaumont, who played the affable and firm father figure, Ward Cleaver, narrated a 1950s educational video, distributed by Encyclopedia Britannica, called "A Date With Your Family." The short film extolled the virtues of nightly dinners while driving home the idea that mothers and daughters were responsible for producing them.

While the number of moms in the workforce has skyrocketed since June, Ward's wife, was happily serving up meals for Beav and the gang, the number of dads who do the cooking has not. "About 75 percent of women say they do most of the shopping and most of the cooking for their household," says Bowen. And they are also usually responsible for "the invisible labor of what to make, what everyone might be willing to eat, and managing everyone's preferences."

A gendered division of labor is just one of several hurdles to breaking bread together as a family.

"When parents are asked, 'Do you think family dinners are a good idea?' 90 percent of parents will say, 'Yes, it's a good idea,' but less than 50 percent have family dinners," says Anne Fishel, cofounder of the Family Dinner Project, a nonprofit advocacy group. When Fishel talks to families about why they don't eat together more often, reasons include lack of time, picky eaters, fear of conflict at the table, and not liking to cook.

Experts and parents alike say these hurdles are surmountable. Consider the research done by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), at Columbia University in Manhattan: In 2011, CASA reported that teenagers who had fewer than three family meals per week were two and a half times as likely to have used marijuana, almost four times as likely to have used tobacco,

and more than twice as likely to have used alcohol. In its most recent survey, CASA found that teens who eat with their families five to seven times per week are one and a half to two times as likely to say they have "excellent relationships" with their parents compared with teens who don't.

Dinner is also the time when teens are most likely to talk with their parents about what's going on in their lives (time spent in the car is another likely spot), which might explain the findings of two studies

published in *JAMA Pediatrics* that found that the more often families ate together, the less likely kids were to experience symptoms of depression or suicidal ideation and the more resilient they were if they experienced cyberbullying.

"It's not about having dinner together," says Jessica Andrews-Wilson, executive director of GUIDE, a substance-abuse-prevention and positive youth development nonprofit in Atlanta. "It's about what happens if we are all in the same space at the same time. It's about when parents are able to communicate their values to their teens, be role models, and create positive relationships."

That can happen during other meals too. Mary Beth Foster, a mother of two in Mint Hill, North Carolina, has found it easier to consistently get

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together for breakfast. “Most weekdays we make some variety of eggs, breakfast meat, fruit, and toast. It’s nice to start the day together at the table before we go our separate directions.” And when life takes over and family dinners don’t happen, says Foster, “I don’t feel so bad, because we’ve already sat down together for breakfast.”

It doesn’t have to be nightly (or daily). Melissa Sarno, a mom of two in Cortlandt, New York, finds weeknight meals impossible. Her kids are hungry at 5, her husband is home at 6:45, and she and her husband both enjoy “foodie” meals that the kids don’t. But Sarno grew up in an Italian-American family for whom Sunday dinner with extended family and a big pot of sauce, pasta, and meat and a salad was a weekly institution. Sarno’s family replicates them on a smaller scale. “We do homemade pizzas or roasted chicken or something we all like,” says Sarno. “It’s nice not to have to deal with late-night dishes or rush into bedtime, and it’s a nice start to the week.”

Redistributing the workload of family meals is not impossible. Peter Isbister and his wife, Robyn Painter, are both full-time working attorneys in Decatur, Georgia, and value eating together nightly with their twin boys and 9-year-old daughter. Over the years, the couple has worked hard for an egalitarian relationship when it comes to putting the food on the table. They started by trading off weeks when one was responsible for all the planning and cooking or assigning cooking duties to one parent and cleaning to another. That led to an arrangement in which Painter handles planning and shopping (which she likes to do, and he hates) and Isbister cooks all the weekday meals. On weekends, they improvise. It’s a lot of work, but it’s been worth it, says Isbister. “It’s a built-in check-in time to be aware of what is going on in other people’s lives in the family and what they are dealing with,” he adds.

Some families find that same connection at other times and during different activities. Sally Brooks, a stand-up comedian in Atlanta, often works nights. Her husband is in the office late, so

they rarely get together for a nightly meal. “I love family dinners, but sometimes it feels like another thing we tell each other we have to do to be ‘good’ parents,” says Brooks. Instead, the family take walks, play board games, and “build endless train tracks” together.

BROOKS HITS ON A COMMON NOTION THROUGH THE research on family meals: that parents feel they are not measuring up to the meals they feel they are “supposed” to be feeding their children. But when connection is the most important thing you can be serving your kids, experts say to let the food, the manners, the table setting, and everything else go.

“Family dinners do not require making a meal from scratch, heirloom tomatoes, or a well-set table,” says Fishel. “The real benefit comes from what happens at the table. If there is a warm welcome and kids have an opportunity to speak if they want to, that is the key to family dinners.”

Some families do breakfast for dinner; the Isbisters like to do “Party Board” once a week, when they load up their lazy Susan with whatever finger foods they have on hand and let the kids pick what they like. Others opt for take-out and focus on the time together, playing games to entice the kids to put away the screens and sit down as a group.

However we can make it happen, and whenever we can make it happen, something magical happens when we slow down, close the laptop, leave the phone on the counter, take a break from homework, and sit down together. These kinds of connected moments are threatened with extinction, but we have the power to save them. To take whatever time we have to be with one another and share something about our day (maybe through a game of “Highs and Lows” or “Roses, Buds, and Thorns”), hopefully laugh, maybe fight, and likely spill more than one cup of milk. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that we are there together to work through the argument, be in on the joke, clean up the mess, hear what matters to each person, and remind ourselves that we matter to each other. ✱

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Game On!

Who hasn’t had the dinnertime experience of asking a child how his or her day went and gotten a „fine“ and an eye roll in response?

We asked the parents we interviewed for suggestions on family games that can get the whole table talking.

● **Two Truths and a Tall Tale.** Someone shares three things about his or her day, two of which actually happened and one of which didn’t. Everyone else tries to guess which one is made up.

● **Roses, Buds, and Thorns.** Every person shares a rose (something positive that happened during the day), a thorn (something challenging), and a bud (something he or she hopes will happen tomorrow).

● **Turned Out Right.** When Isbister’s daughter was going through a pessimistic period, he was looking for ways to help her develop a sense that “the world is conquerable.” He came up with a game he called “Turned Out Right” in which everyone shared something from their day they had concerns about that ended up going better than they expected.

● **20 Questions About a Family Memory.** Fishel adds an extra layer to the traditional game



Some more popular games revolve around the alphabet, gratitude, and, of course, celebrities.

by having one family member think of a family memory and everyone else has to ask yes-or-no questions to figure out what it is. “Did it happen on vacation?” “Was anybody crying?” “Were we in the car?” It’s a way to hold on to memories and

create a family narrative, which researchers say helps children feel connected to family identity.

● **Conversation Starter Jar.** Everyone in the family writes down questions on slips of paper and puts them in a jar, such as

“What character in a book would you most want to be friends with?” “What’s your favorite season of the year?” “What’s one thing people wouldn’t know by just looking at you?” Then you take turns pulling out the slips and answering the questions.