

Celebrate Family Day, September 23

Sometimes life gets so crazy that we lose our focus on the important things in life. As we juggle our work, school activities, appointments, and home responsibilities, we often leave our families in the dust. Our meals together are few and far between (if at all!) Recognizing the many challenges families face, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) created ***Family Day – A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children***. This day, celebrated September 23rd this year, specifically aims to promote family meal time while reducing substance abuse among children.

According to the Kansas Family Partnership, “children and youth who eat dinner with their families 5-7 times per week are more likely to be drug-free.” Meal times spent together promote communication among family members and provide an opportunity for parents to connect with their children about the daily events of the family members. The earlier these patterns of communication are set, the more lasting effect they will have as the children mature. I was fortunate to have great role models from both my parents in this area. I grew up the youngest of 4 children who learned how to cook from my Army veteran dad. Dad served as a cook in the United State Army in Germany during the Korean War. The standard “recipe” he used in the kitchen was one-part inspiration, one-part creation, and two-parts of “whatever’s in the pantry!” It is from this foundation that I have been intentional in my own family to find activities that replicate the example I was raised with. In light of Family Day this week, I thought I would share a couple specific ideas about what we do in my family to help promote communication and make our time together more meaningful. Interestingly enough, they both center on meal time spent together, similar to what mom and dad did – but with our own twist.

Because we have 3 busy boys in our family, my husband and I have a deep and personal understanding of the challenges families face in trying to make sure we share as many meals as we can together. To help promote communication at my own dinner table, we play “thumbs up, thumbs down.” The purpose of this game is to make sure everyone at the table shares the things about their day that weren’t so good (thumbs down) and the things that were great about their day (thumbs up.) Each person takes their turn sharing a “thumbs down” until everyone has shared at least one thing. We continue around the table until all the “thumbs down” things have been shared. Then, to make sure we end the game on the positive side, we each take our turn sharing the “thumbs up” events from the day. We continue around the table until everyone has shared their “thumbs up” moments. One of the key rules is that you can share only one thing at a time. This helps promote communication through most of the meal rather than “dumping” everything out at once. Playing the game was a bit shaky, at first. My kids were concerned about what was safe to talk about and what was off limits, but they soon found out that there are few, if any, limitations. If there is a “thumbs down” comment that stirs my maternal defenses up, I will ask “Is there anything you want me to help you with about this, or were you just wanting to share?” This helps me know how involved my son wants me to be in helping them deal with the situation. Sometimes, kids just need to vent and we need to be their listening post rather than their defender. We are in our third year of playing this game and I am happy to report that, if I forget to initiate the game, my kids will remind me or ask if we can play it.

Another thing we try to do once a week is “Date Night.” However, instead of going out to eat, we save the expense and I will plan a meal that my kids can help me prepare. I try to think of things that they can manage with their individual abilities. For example, my youngest is very small for his age, so I need to make sure he gets to do something at the table – like buttering bread to be toasted. My oldest is fairly tall, so he typically gets to work more at the stovetop like cooking pasta and stirring sauces. My middle son is the risk taker. He usually gets to put on the oven mitts to put food in or take it out of the oven. Just like my dad, I use some creativity combined with bona fide recipes to make sure I am teaching my kids how to read measurements as well as encouraging them to be creative. A favorite meal is spaghetti with meat sauce, tossed salad, sliced apples and toasted garlic bread. Although my husband doesn’t usually participate in the cooking (too many cooks in the kitchen can be a bit chaotic!), he does come in when it is time to set the table to help the kids with that task. For more mealtime ideas for kids go to <http://www.kidsacookin.ksu.edu/> or contact me at the Geary County Research and Extension and find a way to celebrate YOUR family on Family Day, 2013!