

Balancing work and family is not an easy task. I am constantly looking for ways to make my efforts of parenting and professional life work together. With 3 young boys and a husband, I find that meal preparation is one area that I spend a considerable amount of time planning for. I am guessing that, as our boys get older; this will become even more important. They are already showing signs of “adolescent appetites.”

I look for menu ideas that are fast (or use a cooking method that saves time), nutritious, and tasty. I keep my most popular and convenient recipes readily at hand. Since I love to cook and experiment with food, meal preparation may come easier to me than to others. For those who feel less comfortable designing menus that are nutritious and tasty, there are a lot of resources you can use to help you get started.

One of the resources available through K-State Research and Extension is a publication called *Month of Menus: Healthy Meals for Healthy Living*. As the name implies, *Month of Menus* gives you daily menu ideas for each meal for an entire month. The menus are designed for healthy living and include dishes that contain only moderate levels of fat and sodium. It includes both practical and uncomplicated recipes that will satisfy the appetites of those with a diverse palate. This resource also provides an overview of food safety, definitions to common cooking terms, and a list for making emergency substitutions. It will provide you with a great start to planning out meals far enough in advance to help you balance the demands of feeding your family with the time restrictions that go with being a working parent. You can access this resource at: http://www.he.k-state.edu/fnp/educators/month-of-menus/Month_of_Menus.pdf

In addition to planning ahead, another way I cut down my time while providing a healthier and nutrient-packed meal is by using my slow cooker. Londa Nwadike, K-State Research and Extension Food Safety Specialist recently shared some helpful information about using slow cookers as part of your meal planning and preparation efforts:

“Slow cookers are a great way to prepare a delicious hot meal on a more flexible preparation schedule, which works well for many people, including families with young children such as mine,” She provided 10 tips to keep in mind while using slow cookers.

1. Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time.
2. Make sure hands, utensils and work surfaces are clean.
3. Thaw meat completely before adding it to the slow cooker. It’s okay to cook large cuts of meat and poultry, as long as it is thawed. Check the slow cooker instruction book for suggested maximum sizes of meat and poultry to cook in the cooker.
4. Preheat the cooker (be sure it is plugged in and turned on).

5. Fill the cooker 1/2 to 2/3 full. Liquid should almost cover any meat or poultry that is used. Start with hot liquids if possible.
6. If possible, turn the cooker on the highest setting for the first hour of cooking time and then to low if desired. Don't use the "keep warm" setting for cooking – only for keeping food warm.
7. Keep the lid in place as much as possible while cooking to keep the heat and steam trapped in the cooker.
8. Before eating, use a food thermometer to ensure the products have reached a safe temperature.
9. Put leftovers in the refrigerator in a shallow container. They will cool faster than if you put the crock itself in the refrigerator.
10. Don't use a slow cooker to reheat leftovers.

More information about slow cooker use is available in the U.S. Department of Agriculture fact sheet: [Slow Cookers and Food Safety](#).

Another thing I take into consideration when I am planning a weekday evening meal for my family is the school's lunch menu. Each month, I go on the school's website to download and print their month of lunch menus. I want to make sure that I am not repeating the same meal home that they are eating at school. More often than not, I find that something I was considering for the evening meal is similar, if not the same, as something the kids will be eating that day at school. Varying the protein, grains, fruits, vegetables and dairy products the family consumes each day promotes better eating habits.

Keep the meals simple. The easier it is to make the meal, the less stress you are putting on your body after a full day at work. Think about what the meal will look like on the plate and make sure you have at least half of your plate full of fruits and vegetables. Vary the color combination of the food served to make the meal more appealing. Recruit your family to help. This promotes communication in the family and teaches the kids about meal preparation as part of an everyday routine.

Planning for our meals in advance helps reduce the number of times we choose to eat out for our meals. Eating at home has proven to have multiple benefits for the health of an individual and the family as a whole. By preparing and eating meals at home, you can usually save money, cater to the taste preferences of your family, helps you consume healthier food and portion sizes, and allows for more family time together.

For more information about meal planning and healthy menu options, feel free to contact me at the Geary County Extension office (785)238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully.