

As we wrap up September, the national Family Meals Month comes to a close. Several Geary County organizations have been working together to get the word out about the value of sharing family meals. Konza Prairie Community Health and Dental Center, Geary County K-State Research and Extension, Delivering Change, and Live Well Geary County are all invested in the well-being of Geary County and surrounding residents.

If you've missed the message about how important family meals are, let me share a quick summary to make one last shout-out for family meals.

- Numerous studies show that home-cooked meals nourish the spirit, brain, and health of all family members.
- Family meals have been shown to have a positive impact on the nutrition status, health, and well-being of the entire family.
- Regular family meals are linked to the kinds of outcomes that we want for our children: higher grades and self-esteem, healthier eating habits and less risky behavior.

So now what? The amount of research on the value of family meals is vast, but that may not be enough to motivate families to move toward a "family meals" mindset. With the crazy schedules of most families, especially with those who are in the child rearing years, it is difficult to make family meals a priority. If you find your family is just out of the habit, take some time to think about how you can slowly move momentum toward sharing more meals together.

In a K-State Research and Extension fact sheet titled *Everyone to the Table: Family Meals Serve Us Well*, Dr. Sandy Proctor encourages us to first rethink what a family meal looks like. "It is important to note that family meals can include eating with anyone you love, care for, live with or who cares about you. It is the feeling of sharing and support that comes from being together that makes family meals so valuable. Family meals aren't necessarily limited to dinners — consider family breakfasts as possibilities for meals together. If time is an issue, set the alarm clock, and start the day on a positive note."

No doubt, planning for a family meal takes both energy and time. Research shows that 57% of people decide what's for dinner an hour before mealtime. Only 26% decided earlier that same day. Those two statistics translate to a mere 17% of Americans that think about their meal plans more than a day at a time. *The NPD Group. National Eating Trends® 2012.*

Don't let the numbers talk you out of giving family meal time a chance in your home. The fact remains that family meals are important to the overall health and well-being of the family and to each individual in the family.

Ellyn Satter, a child-feeding specialist, shares eight strengths of family meals:

1. Meals support food regulation and appropriate growth.

2. They make you a family.
3. Meals support good parenting.
4. They provide children with social and emotional support.
5. They connect us to our history.
6. Meals reassure children they will be fed.
7. They teach children to behave well in polite company.
8. Meals teach children to like a variety of foods.

If family meals are not common for your family, it might seem difficult to know how to get started. Talk over your plan of action with other adults who feed your child, and then talk with your child. The next step? Act the plan! Meals don't need to be home-cooked masterpieces in order to serve the purpose. If you have a mental image of a Norman Rockwell-style holiday feast when you think of family meals, let that thought go! Instead, focus on familiar foods that fit the time, skills and favor of your family. A "family meal mentality" probably won't happen overnight. Old habits can take a long time to change, and family meals will be easier to accomplish if started when children are young. But even if children are older, the benefits of family meals are well worth the effort. The keys are realistic expectations and consistency.

Start from where you, and your family, are. Be flexible, and keep trying. Here are some tools to use:

- Turn off the television. Remember, it is not a member of the family. Let phone calls wait until later. Make sharing the meal the priority.
- Share the effort of putting a meal on the table. You will find the benefits are also shared!
- Avoid making too many rules for mealtime. Instead, try to model the actions and behavior you would like children to exhibit.
- Use "conversation starters," if needed, to keep a discussion going. Other family members may need to practice taking turns to let everyone have a chance to speak uninterrupted.
- Keep the meal pleasant. Try to make mealtimes together a positive time.

Anytime you are trying to change a habit or get out of a rut, it takes intentional effort. Your work toward sharing more family meal time together will reap important benefits for you and your family members. Even if your children have launched, or you don't have any children, take time to enjoy a family-style meal with close friends. The benefits of enjoying a meal with others isn't reserved just for families with children. These types of gatherings are good for everyone.

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach offers great online tools to help you get started. Visit their website at: <https://spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu/plan/>. You will also find a fact sheet on Steps to Menu Planning on the Geary County K-State Research and Extension website at: <http://www.geary.k-state.edu/health-home-family/>

Build up your health and happiness by enjoying family-style meals with those you care about. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!

Here is an optional infographic. As a community partner in the Family Meals Month initiative, we can use the graphic which I pulled from <https://www.fmi.org/family-meals/toolkits/community-collaborators-toolkitrom>

FAMILY MEALS FEND OFF RISKY BEHAVIORS

The more families share meals, **the less likely** their kids are to drink alcohol, smoke or use marijuana.

4x LESS LIKELY (Smoking)

3x LESS LIKELY (Marijuana)

2x LESS LIKELY (Alcohol)

3+ MEALS PER WEEK

"Family Meals Annotated Bibliography"
Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Network

September
It's NATIONAL FAMILY MEALS MONTH
FMI Foundation

#RaiseYourMitt • #FamilyMealsMonth • NationalFamilyMealsMonth.org