



## American College of Pediatricians

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### Patient Information Handout

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## HOW TO HAVE A HEALTHY FAMILY TABLE

Research has revealed many benefits for family members (parents and children) who eat meals together on a regular basis. These benefits include healthier eating habits, less obesity, better family communication, fewer behavioral problems, less television watching, less stress, better school performance, and a lower risk of drug abuse. The following suggestions will help you create a healthy family table in your home.

- **Make family meals a priority.**
  - Take some time to discuss with everyone in your family ways to make family meals possible.
  - Schedules or meal times may need to be re-arranged to make the family table happen.
  - Try to have family meals at least 3-5 times a week.
  - Even eating together at a restaurant can count as a family meal!
  - It is better to have children eat a little later or earlier in order for everyone to spend some time together.
    - Toddlers and younger children may need snacks to help them wait to eat with the family. Offer healthy snacks, such as fresh fruits, nuts, string cheese.
    - If a family meal is not possible, consider a healthy evening snack time or family discussion time.
- **Share in the dinner preparation and clean up.**
  - Chores not only teach children how to do a job and be responsible, but they also make children feel like important members of the family.
  - So, feel free to have younger children help set and clear the table.
  - Encourage your children to help with meal preparation. They are more likely to eat foods they have helped cook.
- **Designate a specific location for eating family meals.**
  - Eat together at a table in a dining area of the home; not in a living area or in front of the television.
- **Protect your child's appetite for mealtime.**
  - Limit snacks just prior to mealtime. Your child should always ask permission before getting snacks or drinks from the pantry or refrigerator.
  - Limit your young child's intake of sweet drinks, even juices. Serve only water or milk at lunch and supper to young children to guard their appetite.
  - Schedule sit-down snack times as appropriate for your child's age and activity level.
    - Offer mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks to your toddlers and preschoolers at regular times and, ideally, at the dining table.
- **Serve the same foods to everyone at the table.**
  - Don't short-order cook for children older than 18 months.
  - Be a good example to your children; eat your veggies.

- **Serve a healthy variety of foods.**
  - Serve foods from different food groups, and include some foods that you know will be acceptable to most people at the table.
  - Serve home-cooked foods as often as possible.
  - However, even a fast-food meal purchased on the way home from work and served at the family table is better than no table time at all. Most fast-food restaurants offer some healthy options.
- **Turn off the television and other media during mealtime.**
  - Children from families in which television viewing is a normal part of meal routines have poorer dietary patterns (fewer fruits and vegetables; more pizzas, snack foods, and sodas) than those of children from families in which television viewing and eating are separate activities.
  - Encourage older children and adolescents to turn off cell /smart phones.
  - Avoid texting or answering the telephone during meal time.
- **Encourage pleasant conversation.**
  - Set the mood – create a relaxing environment. If necessary, try some soothing music or even light candles.
  - Require that all talk be respectful and encouraging. Don't allow excessive silly talk that may lead to chaos at the table.
  - Mealtime is not a time for correcting children or discussing wrongdoings of the day.
  - Think of various ways to encourage conversation.
    - Everyone tells something funny that happened that day.
    - Discuss a news item with older children – what are their thoughts?
    - Everyone tells something they learned that day.
    - Choose a positive character trait and brainstorm about ways to live out that quality. The next evening, discuss whether or not each person was successful in doing it.
- **Don't discuss your child's poor eating habits at the table.**
  - Teach your child the benefits of healthy eating before or after mealtime. Nagging your child about poor eating habits during the meal spoils the time for everyone.
  - Older children can be encouraged to display good manners and avoid negative commentary.
- **Encourage everyone to participate and to stay at the table until all have finished.**
  - While this can be the most difficult to enforce, it is key to the success of the family table. Teach this concept early and it will enrich mealtime for years to come.
  - This will require consistent enforcement, even when your child's attitude is less than attractive and the pleas to leave the table are quite persuasive.
    - Be aware of your child's developmental stage since young children may not be able to sit still for long periods of time.
    - Once learned, your children will come to appreciate this family time together.
  - It is important for teenagers to remain part of the family mealtimes. This emphasizes the importance of the family and each person's role in the family. The teen does not have to talk, but should be present.
  - The parent should have a special way of ending the meal so the children know when they can leave the table.