Harnessing the Power of Family Dinners to Create Change in Family Therapy

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What’s so great about family dinners?

1. Good for the Brain
2. Good for the Body
3. Good for the Spirit (or mental health)
Brain Food

- Harvard literacy study links dinner conversation with boost to vocabulary—1000 vs. 143 rare words (Snow & Beals, 2006)

- Kids who can tell stories are better readers

- Higher achievement scores (Hofferth & Sanberg, 2001; CASA, 2007)

- Higher grades (Miller, 2012; Fiese, 2000; Brody & Flor, 1997)
Does a body good

- Consume **more** fruits, vegetables, protein, fiber, and vitamins
- Consume **fewer** fried foods, fatty foods, and soft drinks (Gilman, 2000)
- **Greater** likelihood of eating breakfast
- **Better** cardiovascular health in young teens (Khoury 2015)
- Health benefits **extend** to young adults (Larson, 2007; Berge, 2015)
- **Reduction** of asthma symptoms (Markson & Fiese, 2000)
- **Fewer** calories (Wolfson, 2015)
Soul Food

**Lower rates of:**

- Violence, drug and tobacco use
- School problems
- Early sexual behavior and eating disorders in teens
- Anxiety, depression, and stress

**Higher rates of:**

- Resilience, self esteem
- Kids feel more connected parents

(Sen, 2010; Fulkerson, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer, 2008; Eisenberg, 2004; Utter, 2013)
What makes Family Dinner so protective and effective?

- Talking makes us eat less mindlessly
- One of the few times of day to connect
  - Place to tell stories
  - The importance of ritual
Connection

- Kids who feel connected to their parents feel better
- Catch problems when they are small
- Parents know what’s going on
- Everyone gets a chance to speak and listen
- Connection provides a powerful seat belt
Benefits of Story-Telling

• The way we make sense of the world

• Kids who know family stories are more resilient and have higher self esteem

• Certain types of stories (lemonade from lemons) are extra potent

• Helps kids feel connected to something bigger than themselves.
Duke’s “Do you know? Scale: 20 Questions

- Do you know the source of your name?
- Do you know some of the jobs your parents had when they were young?
- Do you know which person in the family you most act like?
- Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences?
- Do you know where your mother/father grew up?
- Do you know where your parents met?

The Benefits of Story-Telling

Stories you can tell

- Holidays or celebrations
- When you were the same age as your child
- About an animal
- Work or school
- Overcoming a challenge
- A love story
- Your name or your child’s name
- A story about a new city or country
- A funny story
Importance of Ritual

- Makes boundary around family
- Time away from daily hubbub
- Allows stability
- Scripted and unscripted
- Connects us to previous generations
- Offers meaning
the FamilyDinner Project.org
SEPTEMBER 2016

DINNER TONIGHT
Your daily helping of food, fun and conversation
SEPTEMBER 2, 2016

FAMILY DINNER PROJECT BLOGS

Real Family Dinner Projects: The Zhang Family
A family of four shares how using our Dinner Tonight resources has helped them prioritize family dinners and improve their health.

WHAT’S HAPPENING AT FDP

Food, Fun and Conversation at Boston Children’s Museum
Take a peek at our fun-filled evening at Boston Children’s Museum!

The Best Back-to-School Questions
Get everyone talking about back-to-school time with these 10 great conversation starters for all family members.
January 21, 2016

INGREDIENTS

Serves 3-4

- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 fennel bulb, chopped (substitutes: celery, fennel seeds)
- 2 cups crusty stale bread, cut into 1 inch cubes
- 1 (12 oz.) can of chopped plum tomatoes
- 3 cups chicken stock
- 1/4 cup red wine
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh basil (substitutes: dried basil, thyme or parsley)
- 1/2 cup Parmesan, shredded

CONVERSATION

Finish this sentence: "I feel happiest when ________"

FUN

Play Would You Rather...? (Would you rather...be able to fly, or be invisible? Sweat melted cheese or always smell skunk?)
Community dinners

- Cook together – guacamole, salad and lasagna
- Play games: rose, thorn, and bud
- Kids interview parents about childhood dinners
- Kids go off to make dessert and play games
- Parents share strengths, obstacles, and solutions
Omar's Café
Home cooking at its best
4 Ways to Harness Power of Family Dinners

• **Screening**: Ask about frequency and obstacles

• **Snapshot**: Family roles, playfulness, conflict, cohesion

• **Games**: Play in therapy and also at dinner

• **Bridge**: Experiments can go from therapy to dinner
1. Screening

- Like Pediatricians ask about seat belts and helmets
- Do you have family dinner? How often?
- If not, why not? The Big 4:
  1. Lack of Time
  2. Picky Eaters
  3. Too much Tension at the table
  4. Teens don’t want to
Not Enough Time

- Make double batches
- Cook “quick food” like breakfast or lunch foods
- Consider making breakfast or a late-night snack an intentional meal
- Most reliable time to connect
- Push back on culture of busyness
- Only takes 22 minutes
Picky Eaters

• Get toddlers to try foods
• Model your enjoyment
• Play with food
• Involve kids and make them stakeholders
• Cut down on snacking
• Rule of 15: Familiarity breeds acceptance
• Don’t promise a benefit from eating a vegetable
• Dessert is not a reward
• Pair a tried-and-true with a novel side
Reducing Tension at the Table

• Prepare a list of meals that everyone will agree on

• Go easy on teaching manners

• Avoid topics that usually result in fights (e.g., grades or messy rooms)

• Limit technology at the table

• Parents and kids adhere to same technology rules

• Laughter and feeling listened to are best antidotes
Teenagers DO want to eat with you

- 60% of teens eat with parents 5 or more nights a week (CASA, 2011)
- 80% of teens would rather have dinner with parents (CASA 2007)
- Dinner is rated high on list of activities for teens
- Dinnertime when most likely to talk with parents
- Teens have most to gain in terms of lowering high risk behaviors
2. Family Snapshot

- Easier to describe dinner than intimacy, fights, or roles
- Efficient way to learn about a family’s identity, beliefs, and roles
- Tells about how a family assigns roles, thinks about gender, shares labor, nurtures, changes over time, allows for difference.
Family Snapshot

- Who sits where? Why?
- Who decides the menu? Who shops, cooks, serves, cleans up? How is the workload shared?
- Who comes to dinner?
- How regular, planned and frequent?
- What do you talk about? Is it fun?
- What happens if someone doesn’t like the meal?
- Best recent dinner? Worst?
- How has dinner changed over time?
- What changes when guests come over?
"We love each other very much, and we concur on alcohol and coffee. But we're unable to come to an agreement on meat and fish."
“Food as metaphor for love? Again?”
“I started my vegetarianism for health reasons, then it became a moral choice, and now it’s just to annoy people.”
3. Games

- Way to get kids talking at dinner and in therapy
- Rose, Bud, Thorn
- Would you Rather?
- Two Truths and a Lie
- 20 Questions about a family memory
- The Hat game
- (More games in *Home for Dinner* and thefamilydinnerproject.org)
4. Bridge

- Dinner is a laboratory, place to experiment
- Explore family of origin and do it differently
- Dinner as canvas to help with developmental changes
- Use dinner to try out new roles and behavior