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## Know! Frequent Family Dinners Make a Big Difference

When you have children in your life, you never know what each new year will have in store for them. It's exciting and a bit nerve-wracking at the same time, especially when those children are approaching or in their teen years. As parents, we look for ways to encourage their positive developmental growth, while keeping them healthy and safe. Lucky for us, scholars at the Center for Addiction have been researching this topic for many years, and studies show time and again that one item in particular has held steady through the years as making a huge difference in promoting healthy, safe, positive growth for youth—family dinners.

The benefits of families sitting down together for a meal is so powerful in fact that an entire health campaign has been built around it called "[The Dinner Table Project](#)."

### [The Dinner Table Project](#)

This project was created by prevention experts from Four Rivers Behavioral Health Regional Prevention Center in Paducah, Kentucky. It's founded on the belief that **families**

**who eat together form stronger, healthier relationships.** They say that children who have better relationships with their parents and siblings are at a significantly reduced risk for smoking, drinking, and using other drugs, and that these youth have also been found to have:

- Better academic performance
- Higher self-esteem
- Greater sense of resilience
- Lower risk of teen pregnancy
- Lower risk of depression
- Lower rates of obesity
- Lower likelihood of developing an eating disorder

The Dinner Table Project encourages families to eat together at least once a week. The more family dinners you can squeeze in though, the better. And keep in mind, the meal need not be extravagant to be effective. It's less about what you're eating (though you want to include nutritious foods), and more about engaging in conversation, sharing, and connecting with each other.

To make the most of family dinners, consider establishing some "guidelines" to get everyone involved and engaged. There are many parts to preparing a family meal, so divvy up the responsibilities among all family members. Start by getting everyone's input on nutritious meal ideas, then assign one person to help with food prep and cooking, while someone else is responsible for setting the table and filling the drinks. Someone should be in charge of cleanup, but the whole family must agree to pitch in. Another guideline to include is that each person must contribute to the table conversation in some manner. Turn off the TV during dinner and incorporate a "no electronics" rule at the table.

## **Dinner Appetizers and Conversation Starters**

You've now got an electronic-free, ready-to-chat, captive audience. This makes for an incredible opportunity to talk about the big stuff, like sharing your stance on underage drinking and smoking. It is equally important, however, to have lighter talks with your children as well, that allow you to simply connect with them and open the lines of communication.

To get young people talking, ask open ended questions that require more than a one-word answer, like these from the Dinner Table Project:

- What is your favorite family tradition? Is there a new tradition you'd like to begin?
- In your opinion, how important is it to dream and set goals?
- Would you rather live in the country, a tiny rural town, a suburb of a city, or an urban city center? Why?

And just because dinner comes to a close doesn't mean the conversation or fun has to end. If your family's schedule allows, take a walk together, play a board game, or keep it going with a family movie night.

If the dinner hour doesn't seem to work, try coming together for breakfast before school or for lunch over the weekend. It's the gathering around the table as a family, sharing a meal, and talking to each other that deepens our connections and strengthens our bonds. It's well worth doing all you can to make it happen as often and regularly as possible.

## **Sources**

- [Center on Addiction, The Importance of Family Dinners VIII. Sept. 2012.](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Commonwealth of Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services: Healthy Behavioral Development Starts at the Dinner Table. Dec. 2019.](#)
- [Four Rivers Regional Prevention Center: The Dinner Table Project.](#)
- [Search Institute, ParentFurther.com, Table Time: How Parents and Kids Can Make Family Meals Count.](#)

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