



Keep your teens healthy, happy with family-time meals

Question of the Week: Monday, Jan. 18, 2010 United Feature Syndicate

Our pastor suggested that families make a New Year's resolution to have dinner together at least four nights a week. He said there's data that it can make children healthier, happier and lead to better grades. It makes sense, but he doesn't have three teens in clubs and sports and a husband who works late. We're lucky if we see each other every day. Is this true? Or a guilt trip for moms like me?

Answer:

Don't take it as a guilt trip. Your pastor is probably referring to studies of 40,000 teens done at Harvard, University of Minnesota and Rutgers that point to benefits of family mealtimes. The data show that when families eat regular meals together, teens eat less junk food and consume a more healthful diet with more fruits, vegetables and nutrient-rich foods. Girls who eat with their families seem less prone to eating disorders.

Kids who eat frequently with their parents also get better grades and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, says Stephen Wallace, chairman and chief executive officer of SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions: sadd.org).

Wallace cites data from The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University. "Teens who have infrequent family dinners (two or fewer) are 3-1/2 times more likely to have abused prescription drugs, three times more likely to have used marijuana, and 1-1/2 times more likely to have drunk alcohol than those who have frequent family dinners (five or more per week)."

Family rapport over meals boosts report card performance, too. "Researchers say families who eat together frequently have a sense of connectedness that translates to more conversation, stronger vocabulary, more sharing of ideas and problems, and more accountability. If you're sitting across the table from your parents, it's easy to celebrate a good grade and hard to avoid talking about a poor one," says Wallace, author of "Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs and Sex: What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling" (Union Square Books, 2008).

What teens really want, says Wallace, is more time with their parents, and meals are a good place to find it. "In our Teens Today surveys, teens say their relationships with their parents

make them feel good about themselves and make them feel that their parents respect them. Mealtimes offers parents an opportunity to catch up with busy teenagers, and tune in to academic, behavioral or physical changes that might signal problems."

Dr. Mehmet Oz also wants families to eat together more in 2010, and steps it up a notch by advising that one night a week you cook with the kids as well as share the meal. Let them help plan the menu and actually play a role in getting food and family to the table. Wallace is sympathetic to the competing schedules of family members and says it doesn't have to be dinner that calls everyone around a table. "Try for breakfasts and maybe a weekend brunch. Or start with one night a week. Connectedness is more important than the meal's timing."

Try keeping a family meal calendar, Wallace suggests. "When you schedule time together, you're more likely to make it happen. The shared meals become events everyone looks forward to."

Do you have a question about your child's education? E-mail it to Leanna@aplusadvice.com. Leanna Landsmann is an education writer who began her career as a classroom teacher. She has served on education commissions, visited classrooms in 49 states to observe best practices, and founded Principal for a Day in New York City.

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