

Family Meals Bring **BIG** Rewards

If a product could promise parents that their child or teen would make higher grades, have a lower risk of substance abuse, have a lower risk of depression and suicide and would be less likely to be sexually active – what parent wouldn't buy it? In this case, it's not a product to buy, but rather an event to share... a family meal.

It's not just young children who benefit from shared meals, but teens also; when youth finish middle school, family dining drops dramatically. "Benefits of eating together make family mealtime a tradition worth pursuing as often as possible" says Susan Mills-Gray, Nutrition Specialist with University of Missouri Extension. "Having raised five children, all who were active in both school organizations and sports, as well as community youth groups, I fully understand how busy life can be for a family; but our family made the commitment to have at least one meal together daily and if a meal became a challenge for a particular day, then we gathered for a late evening snack around our kitchen table," adds Mills-Gray.

Research finds that shared meals offer big benefits for your children and teens:

- Stronger family bond – offers a feeling of belonging and adds a sense of security through routine
- Improves communication – everyone has the chance to share about their day, parents can find out more about school events and their children's friends, and parents role model the importance of spending time together
- Shared learning – table manners, social skills, food preparation, family values
- Higher academic performance – young children benefit from exposure to adult conversation and teens thrive in a secure routine
- Reduced risk of depression and suicide – especially for female teens, which are a high risk of eating disorders
- Lower rates of smoking, alcohol and illegal drug use
- Less likely to be sexually active, get into fights or to be suspended from school
- Offers routine and consistency which brings a feeling of security

Parents should remember that it's their responsibility for what and when food is offered, children and teens are to decide how much to eat or even if they will eat. Try to make mealtime pleasant -- avoid discipline issues while eating. Eliminate distractions and interruptions – no cell phones, TV, music, etc. Eat with your children whenever possible, even if it's not every day and make the most of every opportunity. Parents may even need to "schedule" family meals if necessary – if not a meal, then a share a snack together. Mills-Gray adds, "If you're too busy for a family meal, you may be too busy!"

For more information contact your local MU Extension Center or this faculty member directly at mills-grays@missouri.edu

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