

Let's Eat—and Learn—Together!

Eating together as a family is an ideal way to build healthy eating habits. But that's not all that happens when you gather around the table for a meal. You also build bonds, and you can even help your youngsters practice skills they're learning in school. Use the advice in this guide.



Make time for meals

Is getting a nutritious meal on the table every night a challenge with your busy schedule? You're not alone! These tips can make it easier.

Plan ahead

Each week, talk about your schedule, and let your child write mealtimes on the calendar. It doesn't have to be dinner. If you know you're working late one evening, have him pencil in breakfast together. Share a picnic before his baseball practice. Or look forward to capping off a hectic week with a Saturday brunch.

Find shortcuts

No time to cook *and* eat? Skip the cooking part! Stop by the grocery store for a rotisserie chicken, microwavable “steam in the bag” potatoes, and a salad from the salad bar. Or make double batches of soups and casseroles on weekends, and freeze half to defrost during the week. Another idea is to set out a buffet of food you don't have to heat up, such as cold leftover chicken, cheese cubes, whole-wheat crackers, carrot and celery sticks with hummus, grapes, and apple slices.

Use teamwork

Involve your youngster in every aspect of family meals—from helping you prepare and cook food to setting the table and cleaning up afterward. He'll gain experience following instructions and measuring ingredients. As he becomes more independent in the kitchen, his help will save you time.



Tip: Encourage family bonding by turning off the TV and putting silenced phones in another room during meals.

Introduce new foods

Inspire your child to try healthy new foods—and let her see you eating them, too. Then, for a fun math activity, she could graph family members' reactions to new foods.

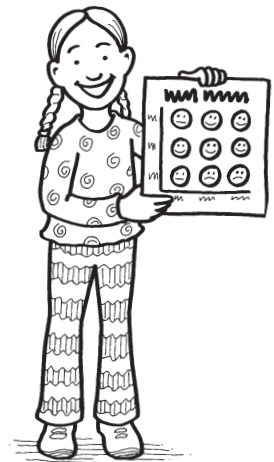
1. Choose. Take her food shopping with you, and pick out something that's unfamiliar to both of you, like kimchi, bulgur wheat, acorn squash, or dandelion greens. Look up recipes in cookbooks or online to learn ways to cook what you select.

2. Try. Serve the new food at the start of a meal, when your youngster is hungry and more likely to try it. Encourage everyone to take some. Talk about the taste and texture, and what you like (or don't like) about it.

3. Graph. Now your child can make a graph with a column for each family member's name and blank rows to fill in as you sample more foods. Have her record each person's opinion by drawing an emoji: 😊 = “Love it,” 😐 = “Just okay,” or 😞 = “Not a fan.”

4. Share. After a week, let her report her data: “More people loved acorn squash than anything else we tried” or “Bulgur wheat got two more ‘Love it’ smiles than dandelion greens did.”

Tip: Don't give up on 😐 or even 😞 them in different ways, and your youngster may update her answer with a 😊.



Bring learning to the table

Mealtime does double duty when you combine learning and food. Encourage interesting conversations and skill-building games with the ideas on this page.



Dinner discussions

Strengthen your youngster's speaking, listening, and thinking skills with these ideas.

● **Conversation starters.** Have family members write questions on individual index cards. (Examples: "What would the world be like if dogs were in charge?" "What is an unusual subject you wish they taught in school?") Keep the cards in a recipe box. At dinnertime, place the box on the table, and let your child pick one to start a discussion.

● **What we learned.** Take turns sharing one interesting thing you learned that day. You'll get to hear about what your youngster did in school, and she'll see that adults are learning every day, too. Maybe she discovered in science class that a pumpkin can float, and perhaps you listened to a podcast about ways to spread kindness. Ask each other questions to learn more.

● **Who am I?** Carry on a conversation while secretly pretending to be a character from a book, movie, or TV show. If your child is a sloth she saw in a movie, for example, she could think about what a sloth would say and how it would speak (slowly!). At the end of the meal, can you guess each other's identities?

Mealtime games

Ramp up the learning and fun at family mealtime with these friendly competitions that put the spotlight on healthy foods.



● **Add an ingredient.**

This game helps to sharpen your youngster's memory. Let him pick a food that can have lots of fillings or toppings (pizza, burritos, omelets).

He begins, "In my burrito, I like..." and names a food (say, black beans). The next person repeats his filling and adds one ("In my burrito, I like black beans and tomatoes"). Keep going until someone forgets an ingredient. The last person who remembered everything starts a new round with a different food.

● **Invent a dish.** Boost creative thinking with this challenge. Everyone secretly writes a food on a slip of paper (spinach, blueberries, sweet potatoes, salmon). Your child collects the slips and reads them out loud. Each person describes a dish

that would include them all (example: spinach salad with sweet potato chunks, grilled salmon strips, and blueberry vinaigrette). Vote for the most creative dish. Write a new set of ingredients, and the person named the "most creative chef" from the last round reads them aloud.

● **Make a word chain.** Here's a game that can build your youngster's food vocabulary. Take turns naming any food—the only rule is that it has to start with the last letter of the food chosen by the player before you. So if you pick *cilantro*, your youngster could choose *orange*, and the next player might say *eggplant*. If someone isn't familiar with your food, you have to describe it. *Idea:* For an added twist, if your word begins and ends with the same letter (*endive*), the order of play reverses.



Editor's Note: Nutrition Nuggets™ is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.

Nutrition Nuggets™

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