

# Meal Time as an Avenue for Communication

## Summary

Making mealtime a major avenue for communication among individuals and family members.

## Materials

Any good food and nutrition book.

## Background for Teachers

Eating together provides time for communication which can enhance social skills, self-esteem, understanding, and feelings of belonging.

A 2005 advertising campaign, entitled "Family Table Time," includes famous television and movie personalities who emphasize the importance of eating dinner together as a family. Many studies have shown that eating meals together as a family can keep teens out of trouble, help kids perform better in school, and just help family members know what is going on in each other's lives. One of the creators of the program, Jill Kimball, has also authored a book entitled *Drawing Families Together, One Meal at a Time*. What does this tell us about the way we eat? We are busier than ever, eating more convenience foods and super quick meals than ever before.

Some families rarely eat together because they feel they just don't have the time. Also, the differences in daily schedules may make eating together seem inconvenient. Both parents in many two-parent families work which gives them more money to buy food but less energy/time to prepare it. Single-parent families may have limited time, energy, and money. Many teenagers are involved, in after-school sports, clubs and many other activities. Convenience foods and fast-foods are common alternatives for individual family members.

No two families are exactly alike in terms of their resources—time, money, energy level, skills, tools, imagination, etc. Every family, therefore, manages meals differently. It is not practical for families to sit down together every meal. There are, however, some important reasons families should make time to eat some meals together whether it is breakfast, dinner or a meal three days per week. Meals need not be elaborate or highly time consuming. Resources management/planning is a key to success.

The communication that occurs when families eat together is one way parents teach their children the things that are most important to them. Also, family members grow to understand each other better. Family members learn all kinds of things from each other while they prepare, eat, and clean up meals. The way family members talk, their traditions and values can be shaped during meal time. For example, family members have an opportunity to practice their communication skills. Family members can learn to solve problems during dinner. You may have learned to hold a fork and behave in a certain way at the table. Important information is often relayed at mealtime. Some families rarely eat meals together because their lifestyles have become more hectic and fast paced. A number of families have not replaced this valuable time that was spent together with other activities. Important values and ways of living have been lost as a result.

Following instruction on eating some meals together as a family, students will sense the importance of communicating while eating. They will practice carrying on a conversation as per activity #2. Serving meals that have eye appeal can be as psychologically satisfying as eating them. (Show pictures of food that is appetizing in appearance). Meal service, centerpieces, etc. can be creative outlets which relieve the boredom of everyday activities. Self-worth can come from creating beautiful food that tastes good.

## Instructional Procedures

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

### OPTION #1

Read the following case study to the class. Use the practical reasoning process to resolve the question: What should Karen do regarding eating patterns for her family?

Karen and her husband, Bret, live in a big city and are highly involved in careers. Though they were both raised in a small town, they enjoy their lifestyle in spite of commuting a long distance to work each day. Their two children, Lisa and David, are teenagers and have become more and more involved with extracurricular activities such as school clubs, music lessons and art classes. Lately, Karen has been noticing how little time the family spends together. Karen and Brent came from families that always sat down to eat the evening meal together. When it comes to their own family they are frustrated. They get home late from work and Lisa and David have usually gone for the evening. Karen feels her family is missing out by not eating dinner together. What should she do? Have the students brainstorm ideas to solve this problem. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of sitting down together as a family for dinner. (One advantage is to converse with each other.)

### OPTION #2

Have the students complete a lab by preparing any Jello dessert salad of the teacher's or students' choice. Prepare this salad the day before the activity.

The students will practice carrying on a conversation using the following as directions for the activity: Sit the students around tables. Serve the prepared dessert salad and a glass of water. Use placemats and napkins. Tell the students that, while eating, they are to engage the person on one side of them in pleasant conversation (anything that interests them). Set a timer for five minutes. When the timer buzzes the table turns and they engage the person on the other side in a conversation for five minutes.

An alternative to having the students choose their own subjects of conversation would be to give each student a topic (drawn at random from a bowl of ideas) and have each student responsible to start a conversation based on the topic chosen. These topics could be assigned ahead of time, giving each student time to research interesting and informative information about the topic.

Discuss topics used in conversation, feelings of participants, etc. that occurred during the conversations.

### OPTION #3

To follow-up on the importance of eating meals together at home, have students read the following case study and answer questions provided. Have them then write their own case study and accompanying questions related to family and food--this could be fictional or come from personal experience.

### CASE STUDY

Ann, a young mother who taught a university-level food preparation course moved into a new neighborhood. When other mothers in the neighborhood discovered her profession, Ann was faced with interesting comments and questions, like: "Wow! You must be a good cook!" or "Do you cook dinner for your family every night?" or "My family would love it if I prepared dinner every night!." Ann had never considered herself special or a super-human wife and mother, but, after these comments, she was beginning to wonder if she was a bit out of the ordinary.

What did the comments of neighborhood mothers tell about their confidence in their cooking skills?

*They may not have much experience cooking or knowledge of nutrition and food preparation*

What did the comments of neighborhood mothers tell about their family meals?

*Maybe they contain many convenience foods. Maybe they are in front of the television. Maybe they don't eat together as a family.*

What do you think most of the neighborhood kids are eating for dinner?

*Convenience foods--macaroni and cheese in a box, "Hot Pockets", hot dogs, frozen pizzas, sandwiches etc. They are probably not eating a lot of fruits and vegetables.*

*Whose families are more likely to be well fed as well as "well-connected"? Why?*

*Ann's family is more likely to be better off in both areas because they eat a variety of foods as prepared at home and because they eat together.*

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