



Extension News Column

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Though we usually talk about money saving ideas that can be used immediately, today I want to talk about long term savings. We're going to talk about changes we can make with our family that pays off in the long term by reducing health issues and obesity in our children.

Here in Fairbanks, we have a group of dedicated professionals who have taken on the project of encouraging our preschoolers and their parents to "Eat Better Eat Together."

Public Health, Cooperative Extension, Play n Learn Head Start and the Fairbanks Community Food Bank are teaming up to teach Head start students and parents to not only eat healthier foods, but to make meal time an important part of family activities.

The theme for this campaign is *Eat Better; Eat Together* to emphasize how important it is for families to share time and activities around food. Families eat more nutritiously and a greater variety of foods when they eat together.

Most families usually eat dinner together about 5 times a week according to studies by the National Pork Producers Council and Washington State University, so we are doing something right. We also dedicate about an hour to the meal, 35 minutes to cook it and 30 minutes to eat it. The biggest barriers to eating together, of course, are busy schedules.

Work interferes as well as evening activities such as sports, lessons, and club activities.

Here's why it is important to eat together:

- Families and health professionals cite better communication as the most frequent benefit to eating together. Parents want to feel attached to their kids and kids want to feel close to their parents. Oprah Winfrey conducted a "Family Dinner Experiment" in 1993 when five families volunteered to eat dinner together every night for a month. Sharing meals was a chore for many families at first, but by the end of the month, and wanted to continue dining together most evenings, if not every night. When these families appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show at the end of the experiment, parents were most surprised about how much their children treasured these family meals.

- Students do better in school when they eat with their families. In a survey of high school seniors, students who regularly ate dinner with their families at least four times a week scored better than those who did not. Preschoolers who eat with their families seem to develop better language skills as well. Though there may be nothing magical about mealtimes, they give children the opportunity to have long conversations with parents and siblings and to hear words they rarely hear any other time of the day. Giving children these periods of time to listen and think seems to enhance their linguistic development.

- Students have fewer behavioral problems when they eat meals with their families. Students ages 12 to 18 showed better adjustment when they ate meals five times a week than those students who ate meals three or fewer times a week. Another survey shows that well-adjusted teens ate meals with an adult in their family an average of 5.4 days a week, compared to 3.3 days for teens who didn't show good adjustment. Well-adjusted teens were less likely to do drugs or be depressed and were more motivated at school and had better relationships. Their adjustment correlated more to shared meals than to any other factor, including gender, age or family type.

The research shows us that time dedicated to family meals will result in healthy, well-adjusted children. What could possibly be a better pay off?