

WHY MEALS WITH MEANING?

Studies reveal that the single most decisive factor among kids who do well in school and avoid risky behaviors is eating meals with the family. As author Miriam Weinstein explains, "Sitting down to a meal together draws a line around us for a brief time and strengthens family bonds by shutting out the rest of the world as a powerful ritual against the many forces pulling us apart." Family meals give us...

- **A place to belong:** Healthy children receive their sense of identity from church and home. At church, the communion table is the central activity uniting believers in Christ. At home, mealtime is the central event reminding each person that he or she has a place in a specific family. Both rituals yank us out of solitude and isolation and reconnect us to those with whom we have an intimate, God-ordained bond.
- **A moment of sanity:** Gathering from the alienation of separate activities provides a much needed moment of sanity because every time we eat together we corporately acknowledge our dependence upon the provider of all life-sustaining gifts. Hunger pangs draw us together and to God.
- **A rhythm for health:** Studies show that when families eat together they are more likely to eat balanced meals. We become vulnerable to destructive patterns when we disconnect ourselves from God-ordained rhythms. Eating alone or on-the-fly increases the likelihood of overindulgence and junk food. Conversation during family meals, by contrast, helps us plan and pace our eating while creating a regular occasion for connection.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Patterns of modern life can make family meals the exception rather than the norm. Some of us can't imagine a Meals with Meaning routine due to dual-income schedules, extensive business travel, or children involved in a variety of extracurricular activities. Establishing and protecting the family table will require making difficult, counter-culture choices. We can't passively adopt unhealthy cultural norms and "hope for the best." If a daily routine is impossible, take baby steps by establishing a pattern of at least three family meals per week.

GOING FURTHER

IDEA CARDS: Pick up a variety of FREE mealtime discussion Idea Cards at our Family Centers at each of our locations or download at hcbc.com/meals.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS:

150 QUICK QUESTIONS TO GET YOUR KIDS TALKING by Mary DeMuth helps prompt fun, meaningful conversation.

THE SURPRISING POWER OF FAMILY MEALS by Miriam Weinstein is filled with insights and practical ideas for making mealtime special.

DINNER TABLE DEVOTIONS by Nancy Guthrie provides short faith reflections designed for use around the dinner table.

THE HOUR THAT MATTERS MOST by Les and Leslie Parrott with Stephanie Allen and Tina Kuna examines the surprising power of the family meal.



MAKING MEANINGFUL MEALS

While not every family meal will be home-cooked, part of its power comes from the preparation process, including...

- **Eager Anticipation:** The time and effort invested preparing the meal creates a sense of anticipation for the formal gathering. The sights, sounds, and smells of cooking launch a ritual everyone knows will culminate together around the table.

- **Memorable Aromas:** Adults remember the smells from their childhood home more than any of the other four senses. The fragrances wafting from an oven, pan, or crock-pot create lasting, positive memories by making home a place children and teens want to be.

- **Dignifying Roles:** When we assign children a task in the process of preparing the meal, setting the table or cleaning the dishes, we give them a sense of dignity that comes from fulfilling an important role in the central family ritual.

RULES FOR MEANINGFUL MEALS

Family meals will be more fun if you follow several simple rules...

- **Give Thanks:** Before “diving in,” the family should pause to give thanks to God as a regular reminder of our dependence upon His grace and goodness.

- **No Technology:** A key goal of the Meals with Meaning routine is to foster good conversation. Sitting at the table facing one another provides a natural context for interaction. Turn off the TV, cell phones, tablets, smart watches, and all other forms of media. (Parents, that includes you too!)

- **Spill Chill:** To avoid frustration and disappointment, you should expect at least one spill during every family meal. Rather than lose your cool when Junior knocks over his glass of milk, use it as a reminder that we are all imperfect human beings. Don't let the inevitable mishap spoil the entire meal.

- **Heed Manners:** The dinner table provides an ideal setting to reinforce basic manners such as how to carry on respectful conversation, look others in the eyes when speaking to them, swallow food before talking, say “please” and “thank you,” and many other basic rules of civilized interaction.



Conversation During Meals

Mealtime conversation should be something everyone looks forward to rather than a place to discuss problems or give correction. Sometimes good conversation requires a creative nudge. Try these simple ideas to encourage both informal chat and intentional faith conversations.

JUST FOR FUN

High/Low: An easy way to trigger informal conversation and learn about everyone's day is to invite anyone to say “High/Low” during the meal. The person to the right of whoever says “High/Low” is required to share the low point of his/her day followed by the high point of his/her day. For example, Mom might share getting a speeding ticket as her low, but learning of Junior's good grade as her high. Dad might share getting stuck in traffic as his low, but kissing Mom as his high. You might be amazed at what you discover about everyone's day using this simple game.

At Your Age: Invite each child to ask Mom or Dad about what their life was like at the child's age. A seven-year-old might ask, for example, “What was your favorite TV show when you were my age?” Turning the tables, parents can ask children to describe what they think their life will be like at Mom's or Dad's age. Dad might ask, for example, “What kind of car will you drive when you are a dad?”

Prompt Questions: Included in this packet is a list of questions to prompt interesting conversation and help your family relate to each other better. For more questions, refer to Mary DeMuth's book *150 Quick Questions To Get Your Kids Talking*. Here are a few bonus questions to get you started.

- What is one thing you wish you knew how to do really well?
- If you could plan a family fun day for this Saturday, what would we do? Describe the day hour by hour.
- If you were stranded on a deserted island, what three things would you most want to have with you? Why?
- If you could live in any time period, which would you choose? Why?

Child's Choice Night: Let a child participate in planning and creating a mealtime experience. Teach them to cook one meal they can prepare every week, or let them help plan fun menu changes such as “eat dessert first” or “eat all red foods.”

INTENTIONAL FAITH TALKS

Any Age: There are a variety of questions you can ask that will prompt faith-related discussion. Here are four examples...

- What Bible story or lesson did you learn at church this past weekend?
- Name a favorite Bible character and tell his/her story.
- If God wrote you a letter, what topic would He address and what would He say?
- God knows our future. What do you hope He sees for your future at age ____?

Older Kids: Pick an age-appropriate topic to discuss from a Christian perspective. Don't worry whether you have all of the answers. The important thing is to make conversation about the truth a natural part of family life. Suggested topics include...

- Why does it really matter whether Jesus Christ literally rose from the dead? (See I Corinthians 15:3-19)
- What is Satan's most powerful weapon against us? (See John 8:44)
- Why should we treat every human being with dignity? (See Genesis 1:27-28)

Memorize Together: Select something to memorize together as a family, spending 1-2 minutes per mealtime with the goal of memorizing something substantial over a 120-day period. Suggestions include...

- The books of the Bible in order
- The Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13
- The Ten Commandments listed in Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5
- The Apostles' Creed or a summary of key Christian beliefs from Hill Country Bible Church

Read Aloud: Select a book of the Bible to read through over a 120-day period by reading a few verses each meal. If children are old enough, invite them to take turns reading aloud. A great place to start would be the Gospel of Mark or 1 John.