

Lesson 1.5: Enjoy Family Meals at Home

Background (Read before you teach): Families today enjoy fewer meals together than they did 30 years ago (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; Hammons & Fiese, 2011; American College of Pediatricians, 2015). However, [sharing family meals](#) three or more times a week can lead to healthier eating patterns and normal weight in children and teens. Shared meals can be a relaxed time to talk and help families become closer. Teens who eat family meals more often get better grades in school and are less likely to use drugs or alcohol. Given these benefits, pediatricians recommend that families eat together at least 3 times a week (American College of Pediatricians, 2014).

Adults and children share the responsibility for making meals a positive family experience (Ellyn Satter Institute, 2015). For children and teens, the [division of responsibility](#) means that parents and caregivers are responsible for determining *what to serve and where and when to eat*. For example, they can use [MyPlate](#) to serve a variety of foods, being sure to include some that are acceptable to everyone. They do not need to be “short order cooks” who prepare different foods for the adults and children. Children determine *whether and how much to eat*. While adults can encourage a child to try a small bite of a new food, the child decides whether to ask for more and how much to eat. Repeated exposure without force helps children learn to like new foods. This can be the hardest part for some parents. Especially among recent immigrants who worry that their children will be hungry, bribes and threats are commonly used to get children to eat (Kaiser, Martinez, Harwood, & Garcia, 1999; Kaiser, Melgar-Quiñonez, Lamp, Johns, & Harwood, 2001; Conlon et al., 2015). Parents may not view a bribe, such as withholding dessert or cartoons until the child eats, as “force”. Yet, such strategies may not teach the child to learn to like a new food and can lead to mealtime battles.

Instead, the parent or caregiver should discourage snacks--and especially sugary beverages—for at least an hour before the meal. If possible, encourage active play or a walk to build an appetite. Involve the children in chores, like setting the table or preparing food. Even if not all of the family can attend every meal, a single parent or caregiver can be a positive role model by eating the foods together with the child (Kaiser et al., 2015).

Teaching Tip: Encouraging family meals can promote healthy traditional foods (through role modeling and repeated exposure) and close family ties. In households where both parents work (and often at multiple jobs), scheduling regular family meals 3 or more

times a week seems impossible. In that case, simply trying to eat together as often as possible is more realistic. These families might think about planning a picnic for a holiday or Sunday afternoon meal. They might also be able to eat breakfast or lunch together on a weekend.



Source: <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov>

Target Audience: Mexican-origin families with young children, ages 3 to 8 years

Key Message: Eat family meals with foods prepared at home more often.

Objectives: By the end of the lesson, participants will be able to:

- Explain why family meals prepared at home are important (healthier eating patterns, better performance in school, less risk-taking behavior)
- Identify three responsibilities of parents (when, where and what to serve)
- Identify two responsibilities of children (whether and how much to eat)

Materials:

- White board (or post-it paper);
- Colored markers;
- Paper and pencil;
- Supplies and recipes for food demonstration (suggested Broccoli Quesadillas).

Handouts: Recipes

Set-up: Place whiteboard or post-it paper in an area visible to all participants.

Opening (Anchor): (10 min) Welcome! Review what was covered last time and ask if families have made changes, based on their goals. Congratulate and encourage them to keep on trying. Today, we will talk about the importance of family meals and what families can do to encourage fun mealtimes together.

Begin the discussion with an open-ended question. Choose one of the following:

- What do you remember about mealtimes as a child? or
- What rules did your family have about food or meals? What did you think or feel about those rules?

Lesson (Add): (15 min) Discuss the following points:

- Ask: Why are family meals prepared at home important?
 - Children learn to eat healthy foods by tasting them and by seeing their parents eat those foods. For immigrant children, this may be very important to encourage them to continue eating healthy traditional foods, like Mexican vegetable soups, beans, corn tortillas.
 - At mealtimes together, families become closer and talk about what is happening at school or work.
 - Children who eat meals with their family more often do better in school and are less likely to get involved in drugs, alcohol, and other risky behaviors. They may also have better language skills.
- Parents/caregivers and children have different roles or responsibilities in making family meals happen. **Ask:** What do you think about that idea? Let's make a list and discuss together whether the parent/caregiver or child is responsible for each decision. For this discussion, let's consider that children are between 3-5 years old. (On white board, with participants' feedback, write):

| Responsibilities | Parents | Children |
|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Who decides: | | |
| What to serve | | |
| When to serve | | |
| Where to eat | | |
| How much to eat | | |
| Whether to eat | | |

Next, ask participants whether it is mainly the role of parents/caregivers or of children. Mark an X under parents or children, with discussion from participants.

Say the following points:

- Parents are responsible for deciding when meals and snacks should be offered. Young children need at least 3 meals and 2-3 snacks a day to be able to get enough food to grow and develop normally.
- Parents are responsible for deciding where to serve the food. Turning off the TV and other screen devices and putting aside games/books/ phones can help avoid distractions so that everyone can focus on the meal and the family.
- Parents are also responsible for deciding what to serve. They can use MyPlate as a guide to provide a variety of healthy foods—fruit, vegetables, grains (tortillas, rice, pasta, bread), proteins, and dairy foods (milk, cheese or yogurt). In planning meals for the week, they might get input from the children; it is not necessary or wise to serve two separate main dishes (like soup for parents and pizza or cereal for kids).
- Children are responsible for deciding whether to eat the food served. Parents should encourage them to taste small amounts, giving a very small serving of a new food if children are unsure. Avoid using threats and bribes, such as “you can’t watch cartoons

until you eat your vegetables”. Instead, the parents should eat the food too and comment on how good it tastes or how it helps the child be strong and healthy

- Children are also responsible for deciding how much to eat. If they are physically active and have not been eating snack foods all day long, they will be more likely to eat what parents serve. Hold off on giving snacks and especially sugary drinks within an hour of the meal. Forcing children to finish the plate of food does not teach them to like that food. It may also cause them to overeat (more than they need). In preschool, children are allowed to serve themselves at mealtimes. This practice is recommended to teach children to eat until they feel full.

Activity (Apply): (25 min) While the assistant starts the food demonstration, the educator leads the activity.

- Let’s plan a family meal. Have parents work in pairs to plan a meal for their own child (using paper and pencils). When and where does this meal take place? What will be served? What will happen before the meal, after the meal (how does it fit into the rest of the day)?
- Invite pairs to share their plans. **Ask:** What can you do if both parents work and it is difficult to find time to share meals together?
- Food demonstration, tasting and sharing. Pass around the containers, showing the participants any foods that might be new or unfamiliar (for example, low-fat products, whole grain alternatives). Explain step-by-step how the food is prepared. Serve samples for tasting. **Ask:** What are some ways that your children can help prepare this recipe? How can you use it at home? What do you like about the recipe? What would you change?

Closing (Away): (10 min) Pair-up and set specific goals.

What did you learn? Why is this information important to you? Choose a goal to work on this month (or week). Try to choose small changes that you can make within a week. For example:

- This week, we will turn off the television and cell phones during our main meal
- We will have at least one family meal

Write your goal on the recipe handout. Ask a friend or family member to help support you in reaching your goal. Invite families to share their goals.

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