

## The Family Meal & How to Make it Happen

Suggested pre-read: Blog "[The Launch of Food Joy](#)"

Many of us have heard about the benefits of the family meal. Eating together provides valuable opportunities to connect and spend quality time with each other. Studies have suggested numerous additional benefits for both parents and children. These include improved academic performance, reduced high risk adolescent behaviour, and healthier bodies, minds & relationships.

Being aware of these benefits, I tried to implement regular family dinners when my kids were young. Easier said than done. We would wait for my heart doctor husband to come home and get progressively more tired and hungry (or "hangry" on my part!). With older kids, it didn't get any easier. As many of you can relate, multiple children with multiple extracurricular activities = no regular dinner hour. My solution? *Family breakfast.*

### **Dr. Tara's Sunshine Suggestion: Let's Do Breakfast!**

I am a long-time breakfast believer and eater. In addition to the many potential long-term health benefits, a sit-down-together-breakfast can set a positive tone for the day ahead. We can send our children out the door knowing they have been filled with good fuel for their bellies, minds and love tanks!

Our family breakfast routine gives me a tremendous sense of pleasure and personal accomplishment. Honestly, throw in a hard core morning spin class and I feel unstoppable. Think about how you feel when you have checked some fundamentals off your day's to-do list before the morning is half over! If you are anything like me, you are ready to take the rest of the day with its certain-to-happen-hiccups in stride...

Mornings can be rushed, but they are usually free of multiple extracurricular activities and never-ending work meetings. With some planning and make-ahead or easy-to-prepare healthy recipes, you might be surprised to find family breakfast a highlight of the day!

## **Secrets of a Happy Life: Go for Progress, Not Perfection**

As Voltaire said, “perfect is the enemy of the good”. Family meals do not need to be complicated multi-course smorgasbords requiring loads of prep and clean-up time. Many of the smoothies on the [Food Joy page](#) are complete meals (fruit and/or veggie-based with healthy fat, protein and fibre) that can be whipped together in a few short minutes. You also don’t need to gather the entire family each and every day or linger for an hour. Pick some days and times that work each week, sit with whoever’s at home, and focus on quality. Spend 10 or 20 minutes together with your devices off and your phones away. Be mindful of what you are eating and how it tastes. Look at each other. Talk, listen, and connect. Perhaps even use my “[Gift of Gratitude](#)” blog for inspiration and take turns saying what you’re thankful for. It truly makes for a great start to the day!

Below I have reviewed some of the many ways family breakfast can help create a positive home environment and a healthy family life.

### **A Good Start to the Day Will Help Your Family Thrive**

“Eating breakfast has long-term health benefits. It can reduce obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.” - National Health Service (UK)

“There are clear links between nutrition and academic performance...[S]tudies show that students who maintain a healthy diet have improved memory, problem solving skills, and creative abilities.” - Canadian Heart & Stroke Foundation

A healthy breakfast is an important part of a healthy life. And enjoying quality family time over the first meal of the day can have dramatic physical, mental and social benefits for children and parents alike. Good nutrition improves cognitive abilities, which can boost both confidence and school/career performance. Family members can work together to organize for the day. By engaging with an attitude of gratitude, positive connections can be made that reduce stress, improve mood, and get all of us going on the right foot!

- **CONNECTION:** Family meals provide a valuable opportunity to connect with our children. As parents, we can learn and practice effective communication to stay in-touch with who our kids really are and how they are doing. We can listen and learn about their activities, friends & school experiences and keep an eye on their values and moods. For our children, this may promote better, stronger relationships with both family and friends. By establishing reliable and healthy family routines, we can facilitate a greater sense of comfort, closeness and belonging.
- **ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE:** Eating together may help us thrive at school and at work. Research suggests that frequent and consistent family mealtimes promote intellectual development and academic achievement. A study by Dr. Catherine Snow out of Harvard found that conversation around the family table boosts children's vocabulary and reading skills.
- **REDUCED OBESITY, DIABETES & HEART DISEASE:** It can be hard to prove a clear causal relationship between skipping the first meal of the day and the development of obesity. However, studies do indicate that breakfast eaters tend to have better diets and less tendency to overeat at other meals. Consumption of food within a couple hours of waking has also been shown to have a positive impact on glucose or sugar metabolism. This may result in health benefits including a reduced risk of diabetes and heart disease.  
During family meals, parents can teach and model nutritious, mindful eating & healthy portion sizes. Children who eat with their parents (and away from the television!) have been found to consume more fruits & vegetables and have diets that are richer in vitamins and nutrients such as calcium, iron and fiber. Overall, studies suggest that children who eat regular family meals may be less likely to become obese later in life.
- **IMPROVED MENTAL HEALTH:** Teens who eat with their families are less likely to suffer from depressive symptoms and eating disorders. They are more likely to have a positive view of the future and better self-esteem. Parents can benefit from achieving a better work-life balance. It feels great to start your work day knowing you have already had quality time with your loved ones.

- **REDUCED HIGH RISK ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOURS:** According to the National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia, regular family meals are associated with a reduction in high risk behaviours in teens such as smoking, drinking, drug abuse and sexual promiscuity. This can certainly help our efforts to have a happy family life!
- **EXPANDED PALATE & GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE:** Parents can use family meals as a time to expose (and re-expose) their children to new foods as well as different cuisines and cultures. A study in the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that repeat exposure is more effective than rewards on influencing what children like and are willing to eat.

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