



More Than a Meal:

Why Eating Together Matters for Young Children

Family meals are about much more than food. It's about being together. Research shows that eating together is one of the simplest ways to help your child's health, learning, and development. And it's good for the whole family.

What the research tells us

Children who eat regular meals with their family tend to do better in school. They also feel closer to the people they love. Family meals are linked to less stress and healthy eating habits that last into adulthood.

For preschoolers, mealtime is a rich time to learn. It is one of the few times each day when children sit with adults and talk. This kind of back-and-forth chat builds language skills faster than most daily tasks.

Meals build more than words

When families eat together, children learn things that are hard to teach any other way. They practice taking turns, waiting, listening, and sharing. They watch how adults handle daily moments. A hard day, a funny story, or a small fight all become a chance to learn.

Regular family meals also give children a sense of belonging. When the family comes together each day, it sends a quiet but strong message. **It tells children, "You matter, and we make time for each other."**



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



It does not have to be perfect

Mealtimes for busy families are not perfect. Sometimes they are messy, quick, loud, or rushed. But the research is clear. It is the togetherness that matters, not the menu or where you eat. You don't need to have a kitchen table or a big family. A simple weekday breakfast counts just as much as a big Sunday meal. A few shared meals a week make a real difference.

Think of mealtime as a time for food, fun, and chatting. Silly questions, stories from the day, and even a bit of wildness are all part of what makes meals matter.

A few simple ways to start

- ▶ **Turn off screens and put phones away!**
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions, like "What was the best part of your day? The hardest part?" or "What was the funniest thing that happened today?"
- ▶ Share something from your own day, too. You can even tell stories from when you were a child.
- ▶ Let children help. They can set the table, pour water, or pick a veggie. If you can, let them serve themselves. This builds hand and finger strength.
- ▶ Keep it low-key. Bonding is the goal. Have fun together!

Have more questions? Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

Text **SPARKS** to **274 448**

Receive messages like this on your phone

©2026 by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. All rights reserved.