K-State extension agents tout benefits of family meals

Kids do better in school, build resilience when families eat together

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – In many families, mom and dad usually make sure that nutrition gets a prime seat at the dinner table. But Tristen Cope says there’s another type of family nourishment that parents may not always think about.

“Family meals are for comfort and support and a time when you should build intentional relationships with each other,” said Cope, a family and youth development agent in K-State Research and Extension's Chisholm Trail District.

Cope cited research from a nonprofit group called The Family Dinner Project indicating that some of the benefits to children of family meals include better performance in school, higher self esteem, greater sense of resilience, lower risk of substance abuse and depression, and healthy eating patterns as young adults.

For parents, she said, “family meals are a time when you might dive deeper into topics with your children in a controlled and comfortable format….You get to have genuine conversations with one another and get to learn a little bit more about them than what’s on the surface level.”

Cope provided some suggestions for keeping the focus of family meals on bonding time:

** Keep the meal simple

Stick to recipes that you know the family will eat. Involve children in planning or preparing the meal – perhaps encouraging them to pick the vegetable or fruit that goes with the main dish.

** Consider a ‘Family Conversation Jar’

“This is one of my favorite ways to get to know others during family meals,” Cope said. Use a jar or cup with various conversation topics written on a piece of paper. For parents, it might include describing your first job; for kids, it could be talking about things that make them feel loved.
Cut the screens

Reducing screen time is an important focus for child development professionals. During dinner, turn off the phones or put them out of reach. Turn off the television. “When you have meals, it’s a time for listening and sharing and building relationships,” Cope said. “When you turn off your phone, you’re prioritizing your time and showing your child that they’re valued.”

Let kids help in the kitchen

Before dinner, ask kids to wipe the counters or set the table. Parents can also encourage children to read a recipe – which encourages literacy skills – get ingredients from the refrigerator, slice soft foods with a butter knife, and other age-appropriate tasks.

“There are many ways you can build a relationship with your children in the kitchen by just doing simple tasks,” Cope said. “You may not think of it that way as a caregiver or parent, but to the child, you are building lasting memories that are going to help them later in life.”

Cope and Monique Koerner – a family and community wellness agent in K-State’s Cottonwood District – recently gave a presentation on family meals during K-State’s Living Well Wednesday series. Their talk is available to view online.

More information can be found online, or at local K-State Research and Extension offices in Kansas.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
The Family Dinner Project, https://thefamilydinnerproject.org

Living Well Wednesday Webinar, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/fcs/livingwellwed/


K-State Research and Extension local offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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