

Bringing Back the Brady Bunch

Family Day: A Day To Eat Dinner With Your Children

By Vicki Wilson

The Brady Bunch. The Cleaver Family. The Jeffersons. Even Archie, Edith, Gloria and Meathead managed to sit down to eat a family dinner, complete with, let's call it, lively conversation. If these television families – perfect and not so perfect – could manage it, why can't we?

Unfortunately, there are plenty of reasons.

There's the full-time job. Was it ever 40 hours per week? Sixty to 80 seems more like the norm. And there's the crazy Washington traffic that can mean leaving before the sun comes up, and missing the evening rush hour by coming home way after the normal dinner hour. Finally, there's the overscheduled child – foreign language lessons before school, drama, dance, music lessons or sports after school, followed by homework. It's a wonder anyone can eat anything more than a banana and a freeze pop or any other food that doesn't require the consumer to (a) be seated or (b) use utensils.

With family dinners going by the wayside, the largest loss is the lack of time for conversation. The table talk between Archie Bunker and Michael Stivic was usually heated – but at least they were communicating. It's hard to ask a kid about her day when she's chowing down a fast-food burger and fries between soccer and swimming.

In fact, the dearth of family dinners is having an even more serious effect on our nation's youth. According to research from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA), children who eat dinner with their families are consistently less likely to smoke, drink or use illegal drugs. This information is what prompted CASA to establish "Family Day: A Day To Eat Dinner With Your Children. Kicked off in September of 2001, the second annual event will

take place this year on Monday, September 23. Even though the observance is only in its second year, it is gaining momentum. Ten states have already issued official proclamations on Family Day, and 18 more will do so for this year's event. Coca-Cola is a national corporate sponsor, and the president himself will make an official declaration in support of this important day.

"Family Day is a symbolic reminder to parents of the importance of dinners with their children as a natural and comfortable way of communicating with them," says Ellen Ross, Director of Communications for CASA.

Symbolic or not, the numbers back it up. CASA's 1998 Teen Survey found that teens who eat dinner with their parents twice a week or less were four times more likely to smoke cigarettes, three times more likely to smoke marijuana and nearly twice as likely to drink as those who ate dinner with their parents six or seven times a week. In 1999, CASA's survey found that teens from families that almost never eat dinner together were 72 percent likelier than the average teen to use illegal drugs, cigarettes and alcohol, while those from families that almost always eat dinner together are 31 percent less likely than the average teen to engage in these activities.

"The key is taking the time to talk to each other, look at each other and listen to each other," explains Joseph Califano, CASA President and former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. "Turn off the TV – dinner time is a simple, easy way to be engaged with your kids and show them that you love them; that's what matters."

Califano admits that the bond has to be built up and reinforced over time, as in having dinner together regularly. "If you have no relationship with your kids, and you tell them to just say no to drugs and alcohol, that won't work," he says. Still, the greatest influence on kids is their parents.

"They may not like the curfews or the rules, but when we ask them, they admit that at least it shows their parents care about them and what they're doing," Califano says. In fact, according to CASA research, kids who don't smoke pot attribute their abstinence to parental influence, while kids who do

use it say it's because of their friends.

Now, it may be all those extracurricular activities that are keeping your family away from the dinner table. And most parents who schedule those activities truly believe they are doing the best thing for their kids. But maybe it's time to take a step back and reconsider – to “just say no” to that extra soccer league or third dance class.

“Parents and families need to remember that dinner time conversation is uniquely valuable. Parents should not keep kids so busy that there are no nights to have dinner together. There is no substitute for parental engagement – it's more personal, powerful and important than tennis, dance or piano, because it's a chance for a parent to give themselves to their kids,” says Califano.

Another reason to get back to the table is a weighty one indeed. All this carryout and convenience food is making our kids fat. Sandy Pinney, a Washington, D.C. registered dietician, admits that, as time has gone on, she sees kids in her practice who have never had a family meal.

“There's simply a better chance for nutrients to be included in meals cooked at home,” she says. Pinney blames all the “super-sizing” we see in restaurants for our basic inability to discern proper portion size. So, as take-out consumption rises, so does calorie intake.

“With family meals at home, there tends to be less focus on food and more focus on family discussion. And portions are usually smaller. Eating out teaches everyone to eat excess amounts. Even kids' menu items in restaurants are often more than kids need to eat,” says Pinney.

In a way, it does seem that the odds are stacked against family dinners. However, in an informal survey of some local families, we found a few that are saving the tradition from extinction, one meal at a time. Here's a sampling:

Eileen Feldman of Bethesda definitely holds family dinners near and dear.

“I am a firm believer in family dinners. Unless one of my kids has an evening practice, we wait until everyone is home and then we eat,” which means meals do not occur until 7:30, even during the school year.

“The night that I can fix the same dinner for everyone is my dream night. For a while, my son was vegetarian, my husband was always on a diet, and my youngest wanted steak every night. Turns out the only meal that we all liked was fish, so my

dream meal meant emptying out my pocketbook to buy fish at Fresh Fields.

“As for subject matter, it ranges from U.S. History to the Nightly Challenge – the asking of a question whose answer could be found in a reference book; after dinner the kids would be scurrying around to find the answer.

“Generally, though, we talk about our days, try to catch up on what's happening, at school, work and at home. Sometimes we even all laugh together. I feel fortunate.”

For Sheryl Garton, of Vienna, family dinner coincides with the Jewish tradition of Shabbat, or Friday night Sabbath. “We do a pretty regular Shabbat thing on Friday nights. Although [my husband] never converted, it's become an important ritual for us and the kids. It's the one night of the week that we can all count on Dad coming home for dinner by 6:30, eating in the dining room with a tablecloth, candles and even challah, if we can get to the store! It's a great way to wind down from the week and start ‘family time.’”

Rebecca Kahlenberg, mother of a grade-schooler, middle-schooler and a high-schooler, recently had a fourth child, which really has her on the go. Still, she says, “we eat together as often as possible. I consider it a special time with the kids to hear their thoughts and to learn about what happened to them during the day. Also, now that I spend less time tucking them in at night, I find it's almost the only time of the day (other than in the van) that we really get to talk on a regular basis. Our only real rules are no insulting each other and no reading at the dinner table.”

Current events are often the topic at Sabine Schleidt's house. Both Schleidt and her husband, Lenny Steinhorn, work full-time, but they make family time a priority in every way they can. “We make great efforts to eat dinner together every night, and we succeed at least five or six times per week. It's really a great time for all of us to be together and talk about our day. Sometimes we watch the news together before dinner and discuss the stories in the news. Once a week we also go out to dinner as a family – usually the kids pick the restaurant. We feel very strongly about keeping this tradition going.”

The Clarkson family might also choose current events as a topic but more likely over bacon and eggs. Russ Clarkson works on the The

Newshour with Jim Lehrer on PBS, so he rarely gets home before 7:30, which is too late for the three Clarkson boys. However, he often doesn't go to work until 10 a.m., so the family always has breakfast together, and they make an even bigger deal out of it on the weekends.

Finally, for the Foreman family, dinner together, and the opportunity to enjoy it, was a driving force in a major life change for Tom and Linda Foreman and their daughters, Veronica and Alison. Tom Foreman is a former correspondent for ABC's *Nightline*, and currently works for National Geographic's cable television channel. According to Tom, "one of the primary reasons we moved here from Colorado was so I would have a more predictable schedule, and, as a result, the ability to have 'family dinners' every night.

"Now, except in rare instances, we have family dinner every night of the week. The children are expected to be at the table for the start of the meal, with no TV on, and they remain there, not just until the meal is done...but also until the conversation is done.

"We introduce topics of discussion and play 'conversation' games such as having one

person start a story and then pass it around the table with the next one carrying on the tale. Sometimes Linda gets out a jar filled with slips of paper posing questions or ideas for discussion. Usually we choose our own topics: fairness, education, music, race, geography, religion, sports – you name it.

"Last night, Ronnie introduced an idea: If you fell from an airplane with no parachute, what would be the best way of hitting the ground to try to keep yourself alive?

"Based on my profession, we sometimes do 'newscasts' with each member of the family responsible for reporting something of interest to the others.

"We consider our family dinner one of the most important moments of the day, and a vital part of keeping everyone in touch."

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