

During dinnertime with teens, time is the operative word

By Susan Flagg-Godbey

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Getting your teen to sit down to a regular meal with the family might be a little like lassoing Jell-O, but a new study suggests bringing teens to the table has the power to help them resist drugs and alcohol, feel better about themselves and even get better grades.

Those are just some of the findings from Project EAT, a study of the eating habits and health of 4,746 middle and high school students conducted at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health.

"Family mealtime appears to have so many benefits," says Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, lead investigator of Project EAT and author of "I'm, Like, So Fat: Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices About Eating and Exercise in a Weight-Obsessed World" (Guilford Press, 2005).

"It lets kids watch their parents be role models for healthy eating, gives them access to healthier food than they'd get at fast-food restaurants and is an opportunity for parents to connect with their children," Neumark-Sztainer says.

The challenge? Finding time to cook — and to sit down together.

"Just remember that what matters is time together, not when you eat or whether it's a perfect home-cooked meal," says Sztainer.

These ideas can help you spend more quality table time with your teen.

Q gt Is there a way to serve food that's healthier than takeout and microwave meals but just as fast?

A gt Yes. Look for healthy shortcuts. Some of my favorite healthy fast foods from the supermarket include rotisserie chicken, baby carrots, presliced fruits and vegetables, fresh vegetables you can microwave right in the bag and frozen stir-fry vegetable mixes. A dinner of eggs, whole wheat toast and some cut-up vegetables can work in a pinch. If you can stay away from highly processed foods, you'll get less fat, less salt and usually fewer calories.

Q gt What are the options for families like ours that aren't all at home in the evening?

A gt Breakfast will work if all or most of your family members are home at the same time in the morning. Or try brunch on the weekend. Also be flexible about the time you eat. In our household, we tend to eat later than standard dinnertime because everyone is busy earlier. And you can have a family meal even if some family members are absent. One parent at the table is great for kids, too.

Q gt We eat out a couple of nights a week because we take our kids to practices, rehearsals and meetings. Does eating in a restaurant count?

A gt It can. Eating out has its benefits — nobody has to cook or clean up, and everyone can order what they like. It also provides an opportunity to learn about how to deal with the

challenges of eating out. Portions served in restaurants are huge, and the selections include many high-fat, high-calorie items. Parents can, without saying a word, demonstrate how to get a healthy meal by making smart choices and eating reasonable portions when eating out.

Q gt How do you get your kids to eat with you? My teenage son would rather grab fast food with his friends or eat in his room in front of the computer.

A gt First, be flexible. Your teen may not eat at home every night, but the two of you can talk about it. I would sit down and say, "I want to have us eat together more often. We need to figure out a way to do that." Try to come up with some solutions together. The fact is, teens like getting good food that's free. And in our research, we've found that they like eating with the family, especially if the atmosphere is pleasant. They may stay away from the table, though, if they're getting grilled about homework or chores or the string beans they're not eating.

This column is written by Susan Flagg-Godbey and the editors of Better Health & Living. For more health news and information, check out betterhealthandliving.com.

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