

Donna Stangl-Jung, RD/LD
Extension Educator, FCS/4-H Youth Development
Canadian County
Phone 262-0155, Fax 262-2267
e-mail donna.stangl@okstate.edu

4/25/08

Eating Dinner Together Can Help Families Fight Substance Abuse

Juggling activities such as baseball practice, a PTA meeting, a 4-H activity or a Boy or Girl Scout meeting can really put a dent into a family's evening time. In some cases, families are so busy they may rarely sit down and eat dinner together. However, there are many benefits to taking time to sit down and eat the evening meal together.

Research done by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University indicates that the more often children eat dinner with their families, the less likely they are to smoke, drink or use drugs. Although every family has a busy schedule, by taking the time to sit down together, parents will have an opportunity to learn more about their children's lives, their friends and gain a better understanding of the challenges the children are facing. The evening meal is a time when parents can provide a healthy and positive influence on their children.

Youth who have dinner with the families five or more nights per week are nearly 50 percent less likely to try alcohol, compared to teens whose families eat together two or fewer times per week.

There can be a variety of reasons why families don't eat together, including busy schedules, lack of cooking skills, watching television and simply a lack of commitment to family mealtime. Although it takes time and planning, eating meals together has so many wonderful benefits for each individual family member and the family unit as a whole.

Aside from the bonus of spending more time together during family dinner time, meals prepared at home often are more nutritious than those eaten outside of the home. There is a strong association between teens who eat family dinners and those who are able to make nutritionally sound food choices.

Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, 25 percent of each food dollar was spent on foods that were consumed outside of the house. In today's society, research shows that figure has nearly doubled to 47 percent. Families today are busier and simply find it easier to eat out or go to the drive-through at a restaurant and eat the meal on the way to or from an activity.

It is important to make the commitment to have evening meals together. Sit at the table and not in front of the television. If the phone rings, let the answering machine take the call. To get even more family time together, involve everyone in the planning, cooking, serving and cleaning up after the meal.

If your schedule in the evenings really is too hectic to eat together regularly, try eating breakfast together instead. It isn't which meal you eat together that's important. It's the fact that you're together as a family. Eating together truly can reduce the risk of serious problems down the road. The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, or status as a veteran and is an equal opportunity employer. Information given herein is for educational purposes only. References made to commercial products or trade names are with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement is implied. Oklahoma State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, State and Local Governments Cooperating.