

PARENTS



Growing in Grace at Grandview Park

CHRONICLE

## THE FAMILY DINNER TABLE

BY GREG LONG

Over a year ago I shared the results of the "Parenting Survey" many of you took. Since then I have included articles in this newsletter addressing some of the topics you suggested, such as family devotions, arguing and complaining, ways to spend time with your children, children and work, children and the media, and teaching your child to pray. This month we address another topic that came up: eating together as a family. (A version of the following article originally appeared in the June-July 2005 edition of the Parents Chronicle.)

What do you think were some activities the first Christians thought were important to do together? Most people would probably say "go to church," "praise God," "pray." These are all correct, but there is one more thing those first believers did after receiving Peter's gospel message "with gladness" and being baptized. They "devoted themselves" not only "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship and to prayer", but also to "the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42). In fact, they broke bread together **daily**, eating "with glad and generous hearts" (v. 46).

If eating together is so important for members of a spiritual family, is it important for members of a physical family?

Scott Williams, in his article "In Search of the Elusive Family Meal,"<sup>1</sup> shares some surprising findings about children who eat regularly with their family. They "have fewer behavior problems in school and are significantly less likely to get involved with drugs, alcohol, and early sexual behavior; are significantly more likely to have a healthy balanced diet and less likely to be overweight; are likely to have higher test scores relative to the amount of time spent with family; have higher communication skills and greater vocabulary; teenage girls are particularly less likely to suffer from depression or attempt suicide, and less prone to develop eating disorders."

What's so special about the family dinner table? There is nothing magical about the simple act of satisfying your hunger at a table with other people. The significance comes not in eating, but in engaging. Williams states, "The dinner table offers the opportunity to bring adults, teens, and younger children together to share their individual experiences of the day. It becomes the place where life issues are raised, discussed, and resolved. Rather than each family member continuing to drift into his or her own individual world, the interaction during mealtime strengthens family bonds." (That's why although occasional relaxed meals are not wrong, eating together in the living room while watching TV doesn't count as "family dinner time"!)

The family dinner table is also a place to teach conversational skills and manners. Dr. Jayne Fulkerson, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Minneapolis, says, "At mealtime, you share food but also thoughts and opinion. It's a good forum for that. These days there are fewer and fewer rituals like this."<sup>2</sup>

Most importantly, the family dinner table provides a great way to fulfill Deuteronomy 6:6-7—"And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house..." Some families conclude their dinner time

with family devotions—a brief time of Bible reading and prayer. At the very least the family dinner table provides wonderful opportunities for "God talk"—discussions about spiritual matters and about how to think biblically about all the other stuff of everyday life.

The significance comes not in eating, but in engaging.

"Unfortunately," Williams says, "few families are enjoying this important part of life. Research suggests that between 10 and 40 percent of children never or seldom eat together with their family. On average a family shares only 3-5 meals together a week, and even that average drops considerably as children become teens."

Families today are very busy, and often find themselves eating on the run rather than around the table. But perhaps it is a matter of priorities and a matter of scheduling. According to Dr. Wilkerson, "Three to four times a week is a good thing to shoot for, but one family meal is better than none." On the back are some suggestions on how to make the dinner table a wonderful part of your family's life.

<sup>1</sup>[www.familylife.com/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=dnJHKLNnFoG&b=3781383&ct=4638865](http://www.familylife.com/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=dnJHKLNnFoG&b=3781383&ct=4638865)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.canada.com/health/What+dinner+Self+esteem+literacy+curtailed+high+risk+behaviour/2416437/story.html>

Are we allowed to smile?



(In case you're wondering, this is NOT how family dinner time has to be!)

## HELPS FOR FAMILY DINNER TIME

- **Set reasonable goals.** If you're not eating together at all, start off with one or two simple meals, then gradually increase the number of meals and how elaborate they are. Set a goal for the number of meals you want to eat each week as a family and require everyone to be there. Dads, make it a priority to come home from work on time.
- **Enlist the family's help.** Kids can help shop, prepare the food, set the table, serve the drinks and food, as well as clean up after the meal. In our home we have assigned responsibilities that rotate every week.
- **Minimize your time in the kitchen.** If you're spending hours preparing and cleaning up for a 15-minute meal, chances are you'll give up on family meals before very long. Enlist all your servants like the microwave, crock-pot and pressure cooker. When you fix meals, prepare double or triple portions, then freeze or refrigerate for later meals.
- **Focus on being together rather than creating a full course meal.** If you have to, serve heat-and-eat foods and add a pre-mixed salad for health and to dress up the meal. You King Solomon saw his share of elaborate feasts, yet he declared, "Better a dish of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox served with hatred" (Proverbs 15:17).
- **Make the family table an outreach for friends.** If your children are dating/courting age, it's a good opportunity to get to know a special friend, and to let that person better understand your child within the context of his or her family.
- **Think of discussion topics ahead of time.** A verse of Scripture, the latest news, a new joke. I recently got each family member to jot down their favorite color, flower, food, etc. on a piece of paper. I collected them and read them aloud while everyone tried to guess the family member.
- **Ban the electronics.** Turn off the television and computer, and don't answer the phone.
- **Create some memorable meals.** Every once in a while, you might want to make it really special. A fancy meal is a great way to focus on manners, and a special treat for the girls. It helps emphasize the holy nature of family gatherings. Candles, flowers, and the nice tableware add a special touch.
- **Find ways to make it positive.** Reward a child's good behavior with an extra serving of dessert or the privilege of planning an upcoming menu.

From "In Search of the Elusive Family Meal" by Scott Williams, [www.familylife.com/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=dnJHKLNNFoG&b=3781383&ct=4638865](http://www.familylife.com/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=dnJHKLNNFoG&b=3781383&ct=4638865)

### Have a Picky Eater? Here are some suggestions:

- \* "The Dreaded Picky Eaters": [www.familylifemomblog.com/2009/02/the-dreaded-picky-eaters.html](http://www.familylifemomblog.com/2009/02/the-dreaded-picky-eaters.html)
- \* "Preschoolers and Diet": [www.christianitytoday.com/momsense/2007/mayjun/14.27.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/momsense/2007/mayjun/14.27.html)

## READ MY QUIDS

- **The Gag Test:** Anything that makes you gag is spoiled (except for leftovers from what you cooked last night).
- **Expiration Dates:** This is NOT a marketing ploy to encourage you to throw away perfectly good food so that you'll spend more on groceries. Perhaps you'd benefit by having a calendar in your kitchen.
- **Lettuce:** Lettuce is spoiled when it turns to liquid.
- **Raisins:** Raisins should not be harder than your teeth.
- **Carrots:** A carrot that you can tie into a clove hitch is past its prime.
- **Eggs:** When something starts pecking its way out of the shell, that's not a good sign.
- **Dairy Products:** Milk is spoiled when it starts to look like yogurt. Yogurt is spoiled when it starts to look like cottage cheese. Cottage cheese is spoiled when it starts to look like regular cheese. Regular cheese is spoiled when you think it is blue cheese but you realize you've never purchased that kind before.
- **Mayonnaise:** If it makes you violently ill after you eat it, the mayonnaise is spoiled.
- **Frozen Foods:** Frozen foods that have become an integral part of the defrosting problem in your freezer compartment will probably be spoiled (or wrecked anyway) by the time you pry them out with a kitchen knife.

## FOOD SPOILAGE TESTS

- **Meat:** If opening the refrigerator door causes stray animals from a three-block radius to congregate outside your house, the meat should be disposed of. Carefully.
- **Bread:** Sesame seeds and poppy seeds are the only officially acceptable "spots" that should be seen on the surface of any loaf of bread. Fuzzy and hairy looking white or green growth areas are a good indication that your bread has turned into a pharmaceutical laboratory experiment.
- **Flour:** Flour is spoiled when it wiggles.
- **Potatoes:** Fresh potatoes do not have roots, branches, or dense, leafy undergrowth.
- **Chip Dip:** If you can take it out of its container and bounce it on the floor, it's bad.
- **Unmarked Items:** You know it is well beyond prime when you're tempted to discard the Tupperware along with the food. Generally speaking, Tupperware containers should not burp when you open them.
- **General Rule of Thumb:** Most food cannot be kept longer than the average life span of a hamster. Keep a hamster in or nearby your refrigerator to gauge this.

