

LifeMapSM



"LifeMap is a navigational tool to help you on your path towards personal and professional success. Our belief is that you can achieve a more rewarding career, a more productive organization and a more enjoyable and abundant life."

April 22, 2008

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Let's Have Dinner!

Interested in a pleasant, relaxing, enjoyable (not to mention nutritious) way to strengthen family bonds, facilitate family communication, improve family health and decrease the chances your children will engage in risky behavior? Scientific research studies coming out of a variety of universities have identified a common, everyday tool that can help you accomplish all of these desirable goals and it is probably sitting in your house right now. It is the kitchen or dining room table!

Let's start with the bad news. New York University's Child Study Center reports that the average American only spends about 40 minutes a day talking to his /her children. And yet we express surprise and dismay that youngsters are often more strongly influenced by their peers, by the nonsense they see on TV and by the poor roles models frequently presented in today's movies. It only makes sense; these influences (many of them negative) get more face time with your family that you do.

Now, here's the antidote. From the University of Minnesota: Teens who regularly had meals with their folks were less likely to be depressed and more likely to have better grades. From Columbia University: Teens who have two or fewer family dinners a week are more likely to smoke, drink and

associate with sexually active peers than teens who have five or more. Also, twelve and thirteen year olds are six times more likely to use marijuana if they have few family dinners. From Emory University: Preteens whose parents share family events and history at dinnertime report higher levels of self-esteem and better relationships with their peers during their adolescence. From Harvard University: Children are 15% less likely to be overweight if they eat meals with their parents. From Dr. Paul's College of Common Sense: Spending relaxed, enjoyable time communicating with your family on a regular basis can only help strengthen the family unit to the benefit of all members.

You'll note that none of the studies I referenced above say that the desirable goal of more family meals is easy to achieve. There are more two-career families than ever before. People are working longer hours than ever before. Children have more activities outside of the home and more homework than ever before. (And by the way, the research on homework shows that it is useless for grade school children and that too much for middle and high school students bring, that's right, lower test scores. But I'll tackle the great homework myth more fully in a future LifeMap.) Arranging more family meals together may take some adjusting but building a more satisfying and healthy family life will bring benefits to all family members that will echo through the years. Here are some ideas that you can use to help make that happen.

Paths Forward

- **Start Early.** Habits are hard to change so your timing couldn't be better if you happen to be just starting out to establish your own family life and habits. Children like and respond well to schedules. The earlier in their life (and the earlier in your life together with another person) that you can introduce a schedule of regular meals together- especially dinners after the day is done- the easier it will be to maintain the tradition.
- **Make The Case and Make It Stick.** Perhaps work and school schedules have already got your family into the habit of grabbing meals on the fly. If that is the case then it will take some effort to break old habits and establish a new routine. Call everyone together and make the case for why family meals together are important, why you think them a good thing for your family and introduce a schedule. Get input but be clear that this is going to happen. Maybe a reasonable goal to start off with is for three family dinners a week. It may take some work to modify people's various schedules and you may need to adjust the hour or days of the meals. Tinker with the details until you get a schedule that works.
- **Click It And Stick It.** Yes we're talking about every guy's true pal - the remote control. Maybe you are a sparkling conversationalist, maybe you're not. But either way it's unlikely that you can compete with the evening news, an action flick or The Simpsons (who, if you happen to notice, have regular family meals together). Heck, if they can turn off the TV and put away the clicker so can you. (Just remember where you stick it.)
- **Keep It Positive.** This is not the venue for tackling tough

problems or resolving emotional conflicts. Nothing could be worse either for your digestion or the degree to which people look forward to (or avoid) family dinners. This should be a relaxed time to unwind, for sharing stories about one's day, making weekend plans, generating vacation ideas or simply enjoying each other's company. Save discussions about budget issues, bad grades or report cards, curfew violations, missed chores and the like for specific family meetings focused on those issues. Meal times should be a respite from difficulty and disagreement. This will reinforce the fact that loving families do have conflict but that we still can come together regularly, in love and mutual support, at the dinner table.

• **Make It An Event.** There used to be a TV commercial where little Anthony would run through Boston's North End to the sound of his mother's musical voice from an upstairs window calling him home to supper because "Wednesday (was) Prince Spaghetti Day". In New England hot dogs, baked beans and brown bread is a Saturday night tradition. Maybe you can set a theme for one night a week. Or try different themes. Maybe try a "Dad makes dinner" night or meatloaf night or meatless night or fish night or pancakes for supper night. But it should be fun (or at least acceptable) for everybody. Perhaps if you have a dissenter that person gets to pick the next theme night. Maybe the theme isn't about the food itself. How about a table topics night where everybody comes prepared to discuss or offer an opinion about a certain topic; it could be a movie everyone has seen or my favorite vacation, or my favorite artist or a current event or . . . The list is endless. What about a joke night where everybody has to bring and tell a joke or a scary story night or a song night. Or, over time, try them all.

• **Grow Your Family Traditions.** Most families have their own ways of celebrating common holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Passover, Easter, Memorial Day, Labor Day the 4th of July or personal holidays like birthdays and anniversaries. Usually these include breaking bread with family and friends. Maybe you do a Sabbath evening dinner or a mid-day, after church dinner on Sunday. My wife's family has this neat birthday tradition where they have strawberry shortcake for dessert instead of traditional birthday cake. My pal Kevin has a tradition where he whips up a multi-course gourmet dinner just for us and our wives at a relaxing opportunity we sneak in sometime during or after the winter holiday season. Together with some great friends and neighbors on Cape Cod my wife and I enjoy spontaneous and informal potluck dinners with kids, parents, dogs, music and folks crossing back and forth across the street with various dishes, coolers, high chairs or lawn chairs. Establish your own traditions and they will become a part of your treasured family history.

• **Make It Work Any Way You Can.** Maybe dinners don't always work; you can try breakfast or lunch or simple sandwiches eaten together in the back yard or on the porch. Maybe time doesn't always allow for cooking; fast food, pizza or mac and cheese all accomplish the same goal of sitting together and connecting as a family (with, perhaps, a few extra calories or grams of fat). Even meals that are squeezed in on a tight schedule can enhance family communication when time is spent together peeling the potatoes, mixing the salad, setting the table or cleaning up

afterwards. The particulars don't matter. What matters are the time spent together and the enjoyment you take in each other's company.

LifeMap is about building your own family culture and history and actively rejecting those influences that work against a sane, enjoyable and mutually reinforcing family life.

Tired of boring meetings??

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Resources

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