Welcome to: “Family Mealtime – Connecting Families with Food”

Introduce self as needed, or thank the person who introduced you.

This presentation should last about 30 minutes, adjust to fit the time available.
Family Mealtime . . .

Do you believe that in *most* homes parents and children sit down together like in this picture?

Possibly you think no one eats like this anymore.

What you think probably has a lot to do with how *your* family eats.

It is so easy to think others eat the way we eat. Wrong!

Today we’re going to begin our discussion by looking at what we mean by family mealtime, then we'll reflect on our own experiences with family meals, and then we’ll look at how mealtime has changed and the consequences of those changes.
It seems fitting to begin with an understanding of what we mean by “meal.”
Dr. Herbert Meiselman, in this book titled “Dimensions of the Meal,” defines a meal as “a facilitator of food intake.”
Sometimes we get so concerned about what people eat, that we forget the context in which people eat. Meiselman describes a meal as a structured eating event versus unstructured eating that might include grazing and snacking. In his opening chapter he describes the cultural definitions of meals. We can learn a lot about people and their culture when we learn about how they define meals. Meals are described with three dimensions, their format, their pattern, and by aspects of where and with whom they are eaten.

What is a “Meal”?  

- The context in which people eat.  
- Every culture has its own definitions of a meal, including . . .  
  - meal format  
  - eating pattern  
  - social organization  

Our focus today will be on the social context in which food is eaten. Although meals can certainly be eaten alone, and often are, they are generally viewed as an opportunity for social interaction. Did you know that the word companion means “with bread.” From the beginning of history food and eating have connected people.

In all cultures, eating together is seen as a relationship building event.

If a household has more than one individual living in it, meals provide a means for family members to connect socially as well as share food.

Meals are viewed as a major means for children to learn their culture’s social norms. They provide the place for children to learn what foods are considered acceptable and desirable, how foods are prepared, and to learn table manners and how to converse with others in a socially acceptable way.

Social Organization:

- “A meal is a planned social interaction centered on food.”
- Meals are a marker for intimacy versus distance in relationships.
- Meals civilize children in a certain culture.  
  - learn about food (edible vs. inedible)  
  - food preparation  
  - how to behave

We’ve defined meals, so we should probably also define “family.”
This is a definition for family that is applicable to mealtime and food
decision making; it is a social definition, not a biological definition or a
legal definition.
(read definition)
Do you think that the stronger the bonds are between this configuration
of people, the greater the impact of sharing meals together might be?
Let’s begin with our own experiences with family mealtime . . .

(Invite your audience to either form small groups, or just partner with one or two people sitting near them.)

Adapt the following instructions based on how much time you want to allot for this, allowing 1-2 minutes per question:

If you have more time:
Discuss each of these three questions in your group. I’ll give you _____ minutes to talk and then we’ll share with the entire group.

(allow 3-6 minutes for group/partner discussions, discuss with entire group 3-4 minutes, allowing 1-2 groups/pairs to share about each question.)

If you have longer time and break into small groups, designate a discussion leader, possibly the person with the most children, or the most siblings (because they are good at helping people take turns!)

If you have little time:
We don’t have time to discuss all three questions. Just take a minute to each share your best memories of family meals growing up. If you are really fast talkers, contrast that with what family meals are like for you today, and if you have time before I stop you, finish by sharing something you would change about meals, either from your past or your present.
(allow 1 minute for discussion)
Let's look at the importance of family mealtime and why we might want to promote it.

The shared meal has been the primary setting for the formation of eating habits and food preferences in all cultural groups from the beginning of human history.

Is it important that people have this experience?
If less people are having family meals, does that matter?
These are reasonable questions to ask because we may not be eating together as much as we did in times past.

In fact, most surveys of American families find that only about one-third eat together at least once a day. Nearly a third rarely eat together and the other third eat together sporadically. But this does vary with the life cycle. The % of family dinners decreases most dramatically during the teen years. A 2003 survey found that 55% of 12 year olds eat regular family meals, but by age 17 that has dropped in half to only 26%.
Why are fewer families, especially during the teen years, eating regular family meals than in years past?
What do they site as the culprit?
This list is no surprise:
Conflicting schedules, both parents working, often long work hours and split shifts, too many meetings, and kids’ practices for sports and music…
All of these things lead to fatigue and the feeling there is not enough time and energy for planned meals . . .
Also, we are seeing more people with limited skills in food preparation, which leads to a lack of confidence in their ability to get a “meal” on the table.
So, even though 80% of parents say they think family meals are important, they aren’t having them as often as they’d like.
This in turn motivates drive-thru eating and microwave dinners in front of the TV, or each family member grabbing what they want, and eating when and where they want.

Is this a problem? I think so. Eating away from the family table, in the form of grazing, eating alone, or eating on-the-go, has affected eating habits and food choices in dramatic ways.
Dianne Neumark-Sztainer and her colleagues at the University of Minnesota have found a strong relationship between family meal patterns and dietary intake in adolescents.

They have been involved in a study called Project EAT (Eating Among Teens) which has involved nearly 5,000 middle and high school students of diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Numerous publications have come out of this study, including a recent review listed on this slide.

They found that family meals were associated with improved intakes of fruits, vegetables, grains, calcium-rich foods, protein, iron, fiber, and vitamins A, C, E, B-6 and folate. They were associated with a lower intake of soft-drinks.

Why would this be so?

As a child grows, children learn good nutrition and positive eating habits and social skills by the examples set (or not set) by their parents at the family table. To think that children would experience healthy eating as well away from the table would be like thinking we could learn to swim without ever getting in a pool.

There’s something about putting a meal on the table to be shared with others that motivates healthier food choices. Not that it can’t happen
without a shared meal at the table, it just seems to be less likely. Do you find this to be true? Do you or your family eat better at a meal shared around the table than a grab and go meal?
Do you think family meals matter for more than nutrition?
Research shows that not only is eating together a key element in helping people achieve their nutritional goals, it just might go a long way in preventing a variety of other physical and social ills.
Why? Because food *connects* people –
From infancy throughout the lifecycle eating provides a crucial opportunity for families to connect to each other.

As you may know, how feeding is handled during infancy affects more than a baby’s nutritional well being, it influences an infant’s ability to bond with their parents and affects their brain development.

This connection of feeding and relationship building continues. . .
As we said, children who eat away from the family table – whether in the car, in their room, or in front of the television are less likely to eat nutritious meals.

In addition . . . they also do less well in school, and are more likely to use drugs or alcohol and participate in other risk-taking behaviors. This is due to what else occurs around the family table besides the food that is served.

What do you think? Do you think that possibly these reasons, more than nutrition, might be stronger motivators for families to get back to the table and make family meals a priority. Allow me to share a few examples for evidence –
Let’s look at what we know about the role of family meals in improved academic performance.

A study directed by Dr. Catherine Snow at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, followed 65 families over 15 years, looking at how mealtime conversations play a critical role in language acquisition in young children. Mealtime conversations were tape recorded and analyzed. They found that the conversations that occur around the family table teach children more vocabulary and forms of discourse than children learn when you read to them. Educators know that improved vocabularies lead to better readers. And, better readers do better in all school subjects.

Other researchers and surveys have also found an association between eating more frequent family meals and academic success.

*Resources are listed on the Promoting Family Meals web site.*
Here are findings relating grades in school to frequency of family meals. According to data collected by CASA, which stands for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, teens who have dinner with their families 5-7 times a week are much more likely to say they receive mostly A’s and B’s in school compared to teens who have dinner with their families two or fewer times a week.

Why is this? Is it because smarter parents eat family meals? Is it because of the language acquisition and conversation? Is it because parents have an opportunity to talk about school, or remind children about homework?

If a family starts eating meals together, will grades improve? We need to research that question…

Maybe one of things schools could do to improve grades would be to prohibit, or at least limit, meetings and sporting events during supper hour. Wouldn’t that be revolutionary?!
In 2001, CASA, launched “Family Day” as an annual event – it is celebrated every year on the fourth Monday of September.

Why would CASA promote family meals? This slogan says it well – it is one habit that prevents another.

CASA research has consistently shown that the more often young people sit down at the dinner table with their families the less likely they are to smoke, drink, or use illegal drugs.

Consider this: (next slide)
CASA surveys consistently find each year that teens who have dinner with their families two nights a week or less are at double the risk of substance abuse as teens who have frequent family dinners.

- Teens who eat dinner with their parents twice a week or less are twice as likely to smoke cigarettes, nearly twice as likely to drink, and one and a half times more likely to smoke marijuana as those who eat dinner with their parents five or more times a week.

Beginning with the 2010 report, CASA asked teens about communication at the table and found that teens who talk to their parent about what's going on in their lives were the ones who were at the lowest risk for substance abuse and were the least likely to have friends who abused drugs, alcohol or tobacco.

- Teens who eat frequent family dinners are also less likely than other teens to have sex at young ages and get into fights; they are at lower risk for thoughts of suicide; and are likelier to do better in school. This is true regardless of a teen’s gender, family structure, or family socioeconomic level.

- Teens who have frequent family dinners are more likely to be emotionally content, work hard at school, and have positive peer relationships, not to mention healthier eating habits.
There are many reasons family meals are seen as a potential preventive measure against overweight in children:

a. Consistent mealtimes allow children to feel secure that they will be fed; regular meals prevent grazing and promote coming to the table hungry but not "starving."

b. Family meals promote an improved intake of nutrient-dense foods and a reduced intake of nutrient-poor foods.

c. At family meals parents can role model healthy eating behaviors and a healthy relationship with food and eating.

d. At family meals eating can be a focused activity if other activities such as television viewing are not taking place; therefore hunger and satiety cues can be attended to and respected.

e. Family meals promote a feeling of belonging when family members come together and lower risk for loneliness-induced eating for comfort.
A sense of belonging is more important to children than we often realize and mealtime is an ideal time to help parents show children that they are there for them.

The late Mister Rogers reminds us that parents are the most important people in a young child’s life.

Author Barbara Carlson, who wrote the book “Putting Family First: Successful Strategies for Reclaiming Family Life in a Hurry-Up World” says this, “If I had to choose only one thing to do for my children, it would be the family meal.”
A study by the Kraft Company simply found that American families who eat together are happier in many aspects of their lives than those who don’t. Children and adolescents who eat family meals together experience improved family communication, have stronger family ties and a greater sense of identity and belonging.

Do family meals matter to children? You better believe it.

(Could insert personal story here, or reflect on the discussion points made earlier by the audience.)
How can *you* recapture family mealtimes if they’ve fallen by the wayside?

I suggest implementing three strategies to make mealtimes happen:

Make mealtimes a priority.

Plan ahead.

And, create a positive atmosphere at the table.
First, make family meals a priority.

For most families, it is highly valued but under-achieved. Begin by realizing it IS possible to eat together. Strategize solutions to overcome your barriers. If you can’t make it dinner, eat breakfast together. Begin with just one weekend dinner if currently you never eat together. Start small and work up – at least clear off the table so you can eat there. If necessary, get a table. Even eating out can be a family meal, if you go inside and eat around a table together!

To make mealtime work, it has to be a priority for everyone. When other audiences have reflected on their family meals growing up a common theme expressed is the expectation of perfect attendance. This tells children how very important they are.

What might happen if as a society we honored family mealtime? How could our community (organization) honor mealtime?

What if every business, every institution and agency, every school and church took it upon themselves to deem dinner time important and not schedule meetings and practices and other conflicts? Imagine what it could do to support the family!
Second, plan ahead.
This involves knowing everyone’s schedules and working around them.
Meal planning is not commonly done, but it can be learned and once put into practice makes all the difference in the world.
Shop in advance and have food on hand that can be prepared in the time you have available.
Use convenience foods wisely. A packaged salad, pasta and pasta sauce take little time to get on the table.
Get the whole family involved in getting meals on the table. Mothers still do the majority of the involved in getting a meal on the table – share this responsibility!!
Let’s take a look at some examples of how the food industry is helping us get meals on the table.
The food industry has been very responsive to the needs of families for products and ideas to help them get tasty and nutritious meals on the table quickly and easily. *Discuss list on slide.*
What’s wrong with these pictures?

Our final strategy is to focus on each other and create a positive atmosphere. Turn off the TV, avoid answering the phone. Did you know that many surveys show that for more than half of American families the television is on during meals. When TV becomes the focus rather than the family, nutrition and other benefits of family meals goes down. Turn off the set and talk to one another. Keep the atmosphere positive and involve everyone in the conversation. When it comes to shared meals, a good motto is to treat family like guests and guests like family.
Family Meals: Impossible Dream or Realistic Goal?

What do YOU think? Are family meals an impossible dream or a realistic goal?

We don’t need to reminisce about the “good old days” and think that family meals are a dinosaur that is extinct.

Nor do we need to think that today’s lifestyle can’t merge with the dream of bringing families back together around the table.
Any family can achieve family meals if they make it a priority, plan ahead and practice strategies to get meals created, and then come together for food and family fellowship.

As time allows, have audience share ideas they plan to implement to make mealtimes happen.
Pass out surveys to collect regarding family meals.

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