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THE FAMILY WHO DINES TOGETHER...

Ashleigh Feltham explains the importance of eating as a family.



Should you bother eating as a family? Sometimes it probably feels like it's enough, just to get the meal into your kids any way you can! But what you may not realise is that the way your family eats its meals can influence your children's short and long term health.

Much research has shown that eating around a table as a family has a positive influence on the health of your children. This is because children who eat meals as a family – compared to those who do not – have been shown to eat less sugar-laden drinks and increased amounts of fruit, vegetables, foods high in calcium or dairy, and foods containing iron and fibre. Studies have found that children who eat as a family have been less likely to be overweight or obese; less likely to suffer from eating disorders, especially girls; less likely to take drugs, smoke or drink; and less likely to attempt suicide.

So, as a parent or carer, what can you do?

1. Commit to having dinner as a family, at least once a week – aim for daily but, at minimum, make it a weekly event. Make sure you switch off mobile phones, turn off the TV and put away any distractions.
2. Try eating breakfast as a family, even if you're a single parent or carer. Organising this may mean waking up ten minutes earlier but the long term health benefits are worth the effort.

3. Discuss with your children the choices available for breakfast. This can be a great time to educate your children of why certain foods may be better choices.

4. Cook meals with your children; get them involved in all the parts of making a meal. You will be teaching and encouraging them to cook for themselves as adults, which is a skill that is being lost in the 21st century.

5. Give different members of the family different roles in the meal (e.g. preparation, cooking, setting the table, cleaning up).

6. At the start of the week discuss as a family, the dinner meal or meals that will be eaten together. This promotes healthy discussion around food and allows you as a parent to introduce your children to different cookbooks or online resources. You may even learn new ways to prepare and cook.

7. Remember, you are a role model, so if you only drink soft drinks at meal times then you cannot expect your children to select milk or water. By looking after your health and choosing a diet that allows you to be the healthiest version of yourself, you are also assisting your children by setting a healthy example.

The key to success is to work together as a family. It is not solely the parent or

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carer's role to create a healthy environment. Working together and involving the children will help ensure everyone in the family lives the healthiest life they can.

References

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