Importance of Family Mealtimes
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Most parents of adolescents remember their families sitting down and eating meals together, at least daily suppers/dinners and perhaps Sunday lunch or dinner. Research has found that these mealtime practices are very good for the adolescent. Family lives can become very complicated with everyone going different directions throughout the day. Families need time to be together as an opportunity to connect through mutual enjoyment of food and conversation.

Family mealtimes throughout the child’s life need to be focused on the family experience and individuals' lives rather than food preferences. Some parents feel obligated to be a short-order cook by preparing different meals for family members according to food preferences. Research has found this to be an unwise practice because then the focus is on individual people rather than on the family experience of sharing food and conversation about the day’s events and plans for the next day. With the focus on the family and its members' lives rather than food preferences, adolescents can relax and be themselves during mealtimes.

When adolescents eat meals with their family, they are less likely to suffer from eating disorders. Many adolescents with eating disorders spent most of their mealtimes eating alone in their bedrooms, after preparing their own meals. When there are few adult examples of healthy eating practices and positive social interactions during mealtimes, adolescents do not learn the skills to make healthy food choices, and do not discover how mealtimes can be pleasant social events. Rather, the adolescent learns disordered eating habits.

Family mealtimes do not have to be gourmet meals; rather they can include wholesome foods that the parents enjoy, and this enjoyment can be passed on to their children. Some pediatricians have recommended that family mealtimes not involve any conversation about the food itself or individual food preferences. Family mealtimes are times for parents to demonstrate healthy eating choices and to converse about each other’s lives.

Here are some strategies to make family mealtimes with adolescents a pleasant experience:
1. Try to share 5 meals per week together: make family mealtime a routine.
2. Assign your adolescent a role: setting the table, cleaning up, or washing dishes.
3. Have your adolescent help plan menus, shop for, and prepare some of the food.
4. Turn off television and cell phones and limit activities that interfere with dinner time.
5. Discuss the day, current events, and what will be happening the next day or weekend. Avoid discussing the food.
6. Limit access to unhealthy foods, and model healthy eating practices.

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