



No family meal is perfect. **Eat together anyway.**

As parents and caregivers, we all want to raise healthy, happy eaters. We hear messages about organic ingredients, portion control, and nutritional content. We want to get food completely right for our kids. But sometimes it's overwhelming. And when we fail at doing it all perfectly, it's easy to get discouraged and give up.

We understand. So does the Ellyn Satter Institute (ESI). The ESI is a recognized authority on family feeding. They've created clinically tested, highly effective models of family feeding and eating. According to them, if you only have energy for *one suggestion* when it comes to feeding your child, here's the one to follow:

Have family meals.

All you have to do is face each other and eat the same food. That's it. Family meals don't have to be dinner. And they don't have to be fancy or perfectly nutritious. Eating pizza together on the living room floor counts. Of course, what you eat matters. But according to the ESI, the structure of sitting down to family meals is *just as important* as the food served. Here's why:

Great things happen at family meals.

Besides the wealth of important social interactions that happen when we eat together, family meals provide structure for kids. And structure helps children figure out where their boundaries are. When caregivers set up the structure of regular mealtimes and snacks, kids are remarkably able to grow into healthy, happy eaters. Here's some of what's happening during family meals:

Caregivers are deciding what, when, and where the family eats.

This is part of how we as caregivers set the boundaries for children. Sure, we may be offering a mix of foods they like and don't like. But then, structured mealtimes help children to come to the table hungry. That makes them more interested in trying and ultimately enjoying a variety of foods. It also assures children that they will always get enough to eat, a sense of security that is vital in helping them develop healthy eating habits.

Children are deciding how much and whether to eat.

We set up the structure and then let the kids take it from there. When caregivers trust their children with eating, children are able to eat the right amount of food for their bodies. And giving children permission to taste food and *not* like it (and therefore not eat it) tends to produce children who like to eat what their parents eat. It can take a while. Hang in there.

In the end, we want our children to feel good about eating, enjoy a variety of foods, eat enough for their bodies, and take the time and energy to eat. Having family meals can help them get there. The structure and culture of eating this way can create a strong foundation upon which children can build great eating habits.

So whether you're eating meat and potatoes, a gourmet vegan feast, or fast food, know that there's great value in sitting down to eat it together. Our family meals may never be perfect. But having them together can make a big difference.

Eat together. It matters.



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To learn more about the Ellyn Satter Institute and their philosophies, research, and resources for raising confident, happy eaters, go to www.ellynsatterinstitute.org. To learn more about Kaleideum, visit kaleideum.org.