

By: Alisha Fisher

K-State Research and Extension Greenwood County

Family and Community Wellness Extension Agent

*“Raising Healthy Eaters”*

The environment in which a child learns to eat plays a powerful role in shaping their eating habits, lifestyle, and overall well-being. Sharing meals as a family encourages healthier eating patterns, improves mood, and supports mental health. For children under 13, regular family meals are linked to fewer behavioral issues and emotional outbursts. Teenagers benefit as well, with lower rates of substance use, fewer depressive symptoms, and better academic performance. Adults also gain social and emotional benefits, experiencing stronger connections and improved well-being.

Family meals don't have to be limited to dinner. They can happen anytime that works for your schedule, breakfast, lunch, or even a snack. What matters most is the time spent together. These shared moments offer more than nourishment; they strengthen relationships, build emotional connections, and help children develop lifelong healthy habits

Children naturally copy the behaviors they observe, especially those of parents and caregivers. The way adults approach food, what they choose to eat, their willingness to try new foods, portion sizes, and even their attitude towards meals strongly influence a child's eating habits. When parents model balanced eating, try a variety of foods, and speak positively about food, children are more likely to develop those same habits. If you want your child to eat vegetables, fruits, or other nutritious foods, make sure they see you enjoying them too.

Family meals should be enjoyable and low-stress. Keep conversations positive and engaging by asking open-ended questions about everyone's day. Avoid turning mealtime into a battle over food. Serve children the same meal as the rest of the family, but don't force them to eat foods they dislike. It can take 10-15 exposures to a new food before a child is ready to try it. Including at least one familiar food at each meal helps children feel comfortable and more open to exploring other options.

To encourage children to try new foods, involve them in meal planning and grocery shopping. Let them choose between options, such as broccoli or carrots, to give them a sense of control and increase their interest in what they're eating. Follow the “Division of Responsibility in Feeding” approach. Parents decide what, when, and where food is offered. Children decide how much of the provided food they eat. By creating a supportive atmosphere and modeling positive behaviors, families can make mealtime a meaningful and healthy part of everyday life.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.