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LIFE

Family dinners can build teen confidence and reduce obesity

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Family relationships grow around the dinner table, but it's often difficult to find time in busy schedules for those shared meals, experts say. (Fotolia.com)

Meals heal. Dinnertime doesn't simply fuel bodies – it nourishes hearts and emotional health.

Studies show that sitting down to family dinner several nights a week not only boosts grades, confidence and motivation, but teens are also less likely to drink alcohol, smoke or do drugs. Frequent family meals also reduce stress and the incidence of childhood obesity, as well as depression and suicidal behaviour.

According to psychotherapist Mary Jo Rapini, one of the leading causes of teens committing suicide is feeling lonely, and disengaged.

"A family that sits down and enjoys the community of one another at dinnertime bridges that sense of loneliness and assures the child they are part of a greater 'family community' that loves and accepts them," Rapini says.

A strong family bond may be an antidote to teen suicide. Dr. Wendy Walsh, a human behaviour expert for CNN, says family support, not peer support, provides protection against teen suicidal behaviour.

"A new study out of the University of Washington shows that a strong family bond reduces depression and suicidal thoughts in teens who had at least one suicide attempt in the past," Walsh says.

Non-judgmental attitudes of family often provide the much-needed psychological support for teens who suffer from depression. "Teen peers, on the other hand, use judgments and teasing to create group conformity," Walsh says.

"Strong bonds can reduce depression in spouses, kids and teens – relationships heal," says Walsh, of Wendywalsh.com.

Adolescence is a tumultuous time and communication is essential to thriving and surviving.

The dinner table is a great place to grow relationships. Problem is, according to Dr. Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist, families are on overdrive with dual careers and highly scheduled children – the mealtime connection is dissolved, replaced by junk food on the go.

But it's crucial to family health to come up with a workable solution, even if it's one night set aside for family connection.

"No matter how crazy busy your lives are, find a mealtime ritual that works for your family," says Reznick, author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success*.

There's nothing like a laughter-filled table to release the stress of the day with people whom you love and who love you, says Reznick.

"It's a great time to hear about everyone's experience – highs, lows, funny moments, silly seconds," Reznick says. "Plus, the understanding that comes from knowing someone really listens to you, that a family member is on your team, is exhilarating, cathartic and healing."

Food symbolizes love. "When our family honours meal time enough to join together – eating and sharing the day's events – it is an expression of love and caring. Your child feels it, and knows they are loved," adds Rapini, of Maryjorapini.com.

Meanwhile, when it comes to technology at the table, practise what you preach. This is the time parents really have to pay attention to what their behaviour is teaching their kids, says Reznick, of Imageryforkids.com.

"If you don't want your kids on their cellphones or playing video games on their iPad, if it's important to keep that family time sacred, then it's an easy answer," Reznick says. "Zero technology at the table. No excuses, rare exceptions."

Bon appetite! Find a meal solution that works.

According to Dr. Charlotte Reznick, some families work their kids' schedules so there is only one after-school activity a day so everyone is home for dinner.

"Other folks choose a couple of nights a week as treasured; no one makes plans Wednesday and Sunday evenings," says Reznick, associate clinical professor at UCLA.

She knows of another family that accepts the chaos of everyone's schedules during the week, but keeps Friday nights as a sacred ritual. "They pull out their very best china and the kids drink juice from wine glasses. They light candles and bring the spirit of love into their home and hearts as they welcome the weekend. Everyone feels like a 'special guest' at the table. And everyone looks forward to this weekly loving connection."

Feast on these tips to better connect at the dinner table:

- Start dinnertime during set-up time and involve everyone – preparing the meal, setting the table, placing food – even the youngest can help.
- Try to talk one at a time and ask follow-up questions after someone speaks. Play simple sharing games such as "high/low" or "success" of the day.
- So no one person hogs the conversation, everyone gets to speak once before the free-for-all of anyone speaks begins.
- Express gratitude before or after every meal holding hands.
- No one gets up from the table until the last eater is done; parents may want to linger to chat after the kids are excused.

- Courtesy of Dr. Charlotte Reznick, Imageryforkids.com

For some, family dinners may not be possible on a daily basis. Dr. Charlotte Reznick suggests other everyday activities:

- Breakfast together; pack lunches together.
- Drive or walk to school together in the morning with no technology in the car.
- Shoot each other a text during the day to say you are thinking of them. Or leave notes in lunch boxes.
- Keep story time a long time – read to your kids no matter their age as a nightly ritual; it can create lifetime loving memories.
- Sit on the edge of your child's bed and snuggle and chat before they doze off.
- Go to the farmer's market together on weekends – include everyone on decisions about what to buy for dinners and why.

Take Dr. Wendy Walsh's strong bonds prescription:

- Bond over words. Spend 20 minutes a day with each family member, giving them your undivided attention, and doing more listening than talking.
- Practise non-judgment. Celebrate your kids in all their weird and wonderful glory. "If they are into vampires, catch up on *Twilight* yourself. If they love rap music, stop slamming the lyrics and get them to help you understand the art form. Your kids will turn off and tune out if most of your words are critical," says Walsh, of Wendywalsh.com.
- Turn off tech. Have tech-free family dinners at least four times a week. Make a technology curfew in your home where all screens go off at a certain time. Children and teens need to give their brains some downtime from tech before falling asleep.
- Give them responsibility. Help them find a part-time job. Give them an encouragement that teaches them financial literacy. Insist they do community service. "Encouraging teens to give up means giving them a healthy balance of autonomy and boundaries," adds the relationship expert.