“We have a full schedule: three kids in activities most nights and traveling for sports or music on the weekends. We’re lucky to have two meals a week all together.”
– father of three children

“I remember when the whistle blew in our town at 6 p.m. If you weren’t washed up and at the table by then, there would be trouble! Our mother always made meat, potatoes, a vegetable and bread. We loved having company because only then would she make dessert.”
– grandmother to seven children

“If meals were more fun, I would show up more often to eat with the family.”
– high school junior
Shared mealtimes with family members seem to be going the way of the dinosaur for many American households. Children’s extracurricular schedules, parents working all hours, the intrusion of technology on mealtimes—all of these and other obstacles seem to interfere with shared family meals. At times, wrangling shared meals back into the family schedule almost seems an impossible task, yet clever parents are bringing back the family table.

When parents read the research and realize that children who regularly eat meals with their families earn higher grades in school, have larger vocabularies and better communication skills, and make more nutritious food choices, who wouldn’t make time for all those benefits? Additionally, children who eat family meals are less likely to be depressed, have an eating disorder or engage in other types of risky behaviors.

Family meals offer a cornucopia of good outcomes for family members, but how can we make it happen? Here are a few key ideas:

- Careful planning is one part of the solution to match schedules and meals. Breakfast is a meal. If work or activities are keeping everyone from the dinner table in the evening, make breakfast your shared meal of the day. Provide nutritious and delicious food options and sparkling conversation to start everyone’s day in a positive way. Recite a fun fact, ask a playful question or play soft background music. Planning ahead includes making sure everyone goes to bed early enough to make it for the most important meal of the day.

- Some families are starting their dinner hour with a brisk family walk to “let off steam” from their day and show their kids a new kind of “happy hour” – exercise! Next, everyone tall enough to see over the counter helps with meal prep. Again, a good dose of planning is needed to have helpers in the kitchen. Healthy appetizers of raw fruit, vegetables, cheese and nuts can be offered to give everyone time to assemble at home for the dinner meal.

- Involve everyone in your household in some creative thinking around your family’s weekly schedule. Perhaps Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays are shared breakfast days and Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays are shared dinner meals. Children also can help in the menu planning and division of tasks. Write down what you collectively decide about schedules and menus and post them in the kitchen each week. If family meals aren’t fun at your house, find out why. Conversation always should be pleasant in the kitchen and at the table to encourage a good turnout at every meal.