

Agents: This year, WVU Extension celebrates the Annual West Virginia Family Mealtime Month in September. During this time, you are encouraged to promote families sharing meals by sharing information about the many benefits.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

What Are Kids Learning at the Dinner Table?

Just what are kids learning at the dinner table? Life lessons!

When they sit at the family dinner table, children do more than eat. They also observe and absorb.

“They learn by watching adults using such skills as table manners, conversation, sharing and making healthful food choices,” according to Elaine Bowen, a specialist with West Virginia University Extension Service’s Families and Health Programs.

Learning to share, taking turns and socializing builds youths’ self-confidence and self-esteem, Bowen says.

Parents and other adults have to remember that children are always learning—whether the adults are directly instructing them, demonstrating appropriate behavior themselves or exhibiting inappropriate behavior.

Manners are an important life skill that is learned only by sitting and observing and by being instructed. If children see appropriate behavior, they will mirror that behavior. Unfortunately, the same mirror works for inappropriate behavior. WVU Extension educators remind parents and other adults that they must demonstrate the behavior they want children to learn.

Plan to use mealtimes for sharing

Another important type of learning takes place at the family table: Children learn what is going on in the day-to-day life of their family. Dinner time, for example, can be the time to share with each other the highlights of the day. Children learn to communicate in a positive way when they talk about ideas, plans and events with members of their family.

Providing conversation starters for children at the dinner table can teach youngsters to verbalize their feelings and how they want to express their ideas. Asking young children to name the colors of food they are being served is a good way to teach them colors. Also, simple counting can be included in the “what’s on the table” conversation with young children.

Family mealtime also offers opportunities for children to help plan and prepare food, which leads to other valuable life skills—such as organization of and appreciation for foods. This time

together provides “teachable moments,” when parents can help children understand that food does not just appear on the grocery store shelf. According to WVU Extension educators, mealtime is an appropriate time to talk about food production—how food items are grown or produced.

Connect ‘food’ and ‘health’

Children also can learn healthy eating habits at the dinner table. If Mom and Dad eat healthy foods in front of their family, their children are more likely to select and eat healthy foods also. Younger children especially will mimic Dad and Mom and will try food they see Mom and Dad eat.

If a parent has a dislike for a certain food, Extension educators caution, he or she should not express that feeling in front of their children. If Mom or Dad doesn’t like the food, their youngsters may make the same decision—without even giving the food a fair taste test.

A little reflection reveals many ways the family dinner table continues to be a place children constantly learn. Extension educators urge parents to be guided by that revelation and make conscious efforts to keep their family mealtime alive and healthy, allowing their children to benefit from as many skill-building opportunities as possible.