

## **Meal Time is Family Time**

When it comes to raising safe, healthy, educated young people, parents are always looking for the best and latest information. Now it seems one of the most important protective factors may also be the oldest. In today's hurry-up world it is essential that we find time to establish habits and rituals that allow for families to spend time together.

Research is beginning to show the tremendous benefits to youth who eat at least 3 meals per week with their family – without the distraction of TV. Taking time for family meals is shown to benefit young people's emotional and physical health and serves as a means of building relationships.

But that's not all. A study recently conducted by Columbia University indicated that teens who ate at least five meals per week with their family were less likely to drink, smoke, or use drugs than those who did not. The same teens also got better grades and had a healthier sense of well-being. Research done at the University of Minnesota also showed that teens who regularly ate meals with their families had healthier diets and were less like to engage in binge eating. They also had better social skills, character and manners.

Making time to eat together doesn't have to be difficult. If an evening meal isn't a possibility, try breakfast or Sunday brunch. You might even gather around the table for ice cream or a bowl of popcorn. It is the time spent together, free from distraction that matters most.

As you plan your family meals consider these ideas as well:

- Get everyone involved in meal preparation
- Don't start eating until everyone is at the table
- Include everyone in the conversation
- Don't use meal time to discuss discipline
- Stay at the table until everyone is finished