

Please pass the peas: Family dinners build language skills



Eating together as a family and engaging in interesting conversation helps build language skills.

By GreatSchools Staff

While your child pushes peas around her dinner plate, you could be boosting her academic skills. Numerous studies show that children who regularly eat meals with their families have a larger vocabulary and score higher on academic achievement tests. It's not just about watching her push her peas, however; it's about the conversation that happens at the dinner table and the family bonds that are built.

For years, psychologists, teachers, family counselors and dieticians have touted the benefits of families having regular meals together. When families take the time to eat together, they generally eat foods that are better for them and engage in conversations that build strong family relationships. Kids learn about the rules of conversation; parents and kids learn from each other about what's going on in their lives. And the value of family dinners extends to academic skills, too.

Research confirms the value of family dinners

Researchers at Harvard University and Washington University, part of the Home-School Study, gathered and analyzed data over a number of years to see what effects eating together as a family have on children's communication and academic skills. Diane E. Beals (formerly at Washington University and now at the University of Tulsa) and her colleague at Harvard, Patton O. Tabors, found that 3- and 4-year-olds whose family members expose them to "rare" words, such as "boxer, wriggling or tackle," scored higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) at age 5 than those who do not receive the same level of exposure. And children who were exposed to rich vocabulary at mealtimes at ages 3, 4 and 5 were more likely to have better verbal skills continuing on up through sixth grade.

At the University of Illinois, researchers found that children ages 7 to 11 who did well on school achievement tests were the ones who ate meals and snacks with their families while their achievement levels were not affected by whether their mothers worked or didn't work outside the home. In a Louis Harris Associates survey of 2,000 high school seniors, those who ate dinner with their families four or more times a week scored better than those who had dinner with family members three or fewer times a week. In a Harvard study that followed 65 children over eight years, researchers looked at a host of activities - play, story time, family events and family dinners - to see what factors most fostered healthy child development. Family dinners came out ahead.

Why do family dinners make a difference?

Family dinners provide that rare opportunity to have longer conversations. And longer conversations, researchers say, provide children with a chance to think, to hear words they may not be familiar with and enhance linguistic development. Children are more likely to learn new vocabulary by figuring out how someone is using words in context rather than learning by direct instruction or giving its dictionary definition.

In her research, Beals looked at the effect of families having conversations with what she calls "rich content." "It could be discussing a trip to the zoo or seeing an orchestra perform 'Peter and the Wolf,'" she says, "bringing in words like 'trombone' and 'violin,' giving children the opportunity to make connections between words and real-life events." Children need to have both context and content to make the connections that enrich their vocabulary. For example, when a mother tells her young child not to sing at the table because it's rude - from the context, the child begins to understand what 'rude' means. With older children, discussing world affairs, current events or homework research topics can help provide context and related vocabulary.

Extended conversations between parent and child don't have to happen only at mealtimes. In the car, at the park, at bedtime - these are also prime times to connect with your children. What's critical is to be available and willing to engage in these extended conversations, whenever and wherever they may occur.

Children thrive on rituals and regularity, which makes the act of having regular family dinners so appealing. It's also a time when you can eliminate distractions - like the computer, video games, telephone and TV - and concentrate on the give and take of conversation. When families eat together, parents can serve as role models, demonstrating good conversation skills, healthy eating habits (your child is more likely to eat peas if you eat them, too!) and good table manners.

How to make family dinners happen

With soccer practice, homework and parents working long hours, it may be difficult to schedule regular meals together. How to make it happen? Start with small steps - designate one night a week as "family dinner night." The meal doesn't have to be fancy and it can be at home, a picnic in the park or at a restaurant. If you're eating at home, make it less of a chore for one parent by engaging your children in setting the table, helping with the preparation and clean up. If you keep it simple, it will be easier to focus on sharing time and conversation together.

How to engage your kids in vocabulary-building conversation

If the typical answer to "What did you learn in school today?" is "not much" at your house, you may be wondering how to get the conversation going at the dinner table. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Make conversation into a game.** [The Family Dinner Box of Questions](#), which turns dinner conversations into a non-threatening game. Each family member "player" can turn over a card and start the conversation by answering the question. The questions range from the imaginative "If you could have a wild animal from anywhere in the world as a pet, what animal would you choose?" to the more personal "What special talent do you wish you possessed?" Company co-founder CeCe Feiler notes, "The box gives families the opportunity to have conversations in a fun and meaningful way in a game format. Even teens who don't normally want to talk will engage in conversation because it's a non-threatening game."
- **Use family dinner conversation to plan an activity.** Ask family members about a family vacation or outing that they would like to plan. You can use the dinner hour to discuss the logistics, costs, and the pros and cons of the activities suggested. Get your family to agree on the outing and put the date on your family calendar.
- **Spotlight one family member with a special plate.** Have a special plate that you rotate around the table. You can create your own or at the [Red Plate Store Online](#) you can buy a red plate that says "You are special." Each family member gets to have the special plate on a designated night. On that night, other family members have to tell the person with the special plate what they like best about that person. You could also let the person with the special plate pick the menu that night!

With just a little effort to take time to eat dinner as a family, you'll be helping your child build language skills, learn table manners and create strong family ties. It's worth a try!

GreatSchools tip

Play 20 Questions with a theme each night. These could be topics such as ancient cities, state capitals, mammals, etc. This is a great way to keep the whole table engaged and forces kids to research prior to mealtime. – [See more conversation starters](#) from the GreatSchools Staff

