

Parenting 101: The issue --- M.I.A. at mealtime: Even once-a-week gatherings make a world of difference

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Soccer practice. Ballet class. Business trips. Hot yoga.

These days family meals together are a luxury many households don't schedule.

You eat and run. Or eat on the run.

But what's the hurry? The kids will be grown before you know it. And you want to make sure you get to know them as they mature into adults.

The mom:

Kelly Mitchell of Lilburn misses the old days when her kids were young and eating meals together was a lot easier. Now her husband travels more on business. Their oldest daughter, Jenny, 18, is away at college in Nashville. And the younger kids, Chelsea, 15, and Maddie, 10, have busy schedules too.

"I always enjoy when we are all together as a family," she said.

The Mitchells have worked hard to stay close-knit and maintain good communication with their kids individually. When mealtime comes around, whoever is home at the time eats together.

On Sundays, the whole family takes time to sit down for a meal and conversation after church. "That is the one day we don't have other things that are continually popping up," Mitchell said. "Typically, we talk about things that happened in church or Sunday school — lessons that were taught and learned," she said.

Part of the fun of the weekly ritual is picking the restaurant. Everyone gets a chance. "It's the culmination of the week, a restful time," Mitchell said. "We enjoy it."

The advice:

Author and mom Meredith Jacobs believes that families should meet at least once a week for a meal. Her family dines together on Friday to celebrate their Jewish heritage and faith at a meal called Shabbat.

Her book, "The Modern Jewish Mom's Guide to Shabbat," features recipes, conversation starters and tips on how to organize a special family meal that can be used by parents of all religions.

"When I grew up, we had a very traditional house — we had a family dinner every night," said Jacobs, of Rockville, Md.

But when Jacobs became a mother of two with new responsibilities, she found her family's schedule was too hectic to plan daily meals together. Instead, she focused on making the Friday evening traditional meal special.

Jacobs advises parents to reserve one day for eating together. "You don't answer the phone, you don't have the television on," she said. "You elevate the night and make it sacred."

On Fridays, Jacobs and her children make the table fancy or prepare special dishes. Sometimes they sing. The meals, said Jacobs, allow them to reconnect and enjoy each other. During dinner, everyone shares what's going on in their lives. Jacobs and her husband relate some of their learning experiences to teachings from the Torah.

"We are not just sitting at dinner ... and talking about work," she said. "We try to make it about the kids that whole night. We show them the beauty of our religion. We talk to them at a very mature [level]."

Dinner conversations can help children learn how to express themselves and discover more about their family.

Since the Jacobses decided to have traditional Friday meals, their children are more interested in their religion. Jacobs said they want to attend services and sometimes ask if their friends can come over to eat.

"I make this homemade bread on Friday called 'challah'," she said. "The kids love it."

TIPS ON PLANNING A SPECIAL WEEKLY MEAL NIGHT

- > Pick a week night that everyone can agree on and stick to it.
- > Allow no distractions during the meal and open it only to family at first. Invite friends over when you have established the routine.
- > Involve your kids in the dinner plans. Let them help cook, make decorations, recite a poem or sing a special song.

Source: Meredith Jacobs

For more information on Meredith Jacobs' book or dinner planning tips, visit www.ModernJewishMom.com