

Sitting down to supper with children on a regular basis is a simple strategy for building a strong family.

“It’s well documented that children in families that eat dinner together develop social skills, strengthen family bonds, do better in school, and engage in less risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse,” says Dr. Stephanie Farrell. “Scheduling regular family dinners is one tactic to assure we take the time to slow down from the hustle and bustle of our lives and be present with our children.”

“Family mealtimes provide children with stability and a safe environment in a world that is far too often fraught with confusion and pain.”

But with kids trying to stay faithful to a schedule involving ballet lessons, soccer practice, and study time for tomorrow’s big test, how can regular family dinners be possible?

“Start out realistically, even if it means just scheduling one shared meal,” says Farrell. “Keep it simple. The focus is on being together, not a gourmet meal.”

Farrell encourages parents to have children help prepare the meal to give them a sense of responsibility, pride and accomplishment.

“Any help in the kitchen should be praised, so everyone’s efforts are acknowledged and will likely be repeated in the future,” she says. “Additionally, when children are involved in the planning and preparation of healthy and nutritious food choices, they are more likely to eat the food.”

Farrell says when the meal is served, conversation among family members should be the focus and technology should be banned.

“No television, no answering the phone, and no texting,” she says. “This will allow you to actively listen to your children and connect with them. Also, resist the temptation to jump up from the table when you are done eating to begin doing the dishes. No outside boundaries should serve as a distraction.”

Family mealtimes should be enjoyable, fun and relaxing and unpleasant topics or criticisms should be avoided.

“It is imperative to take time to laugh,” she says. “Share a joke or an amusing story from the day. This might help children lower their guard that they may have had to keep up throughout the day.”

Overall, Farrell says parents who plan family mealtimes are showing just how much their children mean to them.