

Family Meals Yield Good Conversation, Better Nutrition – And That’s Just the Beginning

By Steve Baldwin, MS, RD, Associate Poppy Seeds Editor

My eight-year-old daughter Sarah told me something recently at dinner that had me smiling for days.

“Dad, your name is Dr. Von Crazy Steve.”

Now, understand that I am not a doctor of any kind. I never went to medical school, and I haven’t yet earned a Ph.D. (Can I get one in building Legos? I’m pretty good.)

“Why *Dr.* Von Crazy Steve?” I asked, emphasizing the word “doctor”. There was no hesitation in her reply. “You’re an expert at acting silly.”

It was just another conversation around the Baldwin family dinner table. Let’s leave the nutrition benefits (of which there are many) out of the equation for the moment. Time spent with children – any time – has huge rewards for the family. But family mealtimes in particular are special. They should be cherished, fought for, held onto with fierce determination.

The bonding that takes place between children and their parents during meals may be the most important time families spent together. In her book titled, *Your Child’s Weight: Helping Without Harming*, family nutrition expert Ellyn Satter describes the benefits of family meals. “Time spent with families at meals is more related to the psychological and academic success of adolescents than time spent in school, studying, church, playing sports, or doing art activities,” she writes. “Teens who had regular meals with a parent were better adjusted emotionally and socially, had better grades, and went further in school.” Satter goes on to describe the nutritional benefits of family meals. “When teens ate dinner with their parents, they ate better – more fruits, vegetables, and dairy foods.”

Better food intake, in turn, leads to better nutrient intake. The Harvard University Nurse’s Health Study showed students who ate dinner with their family ate more folate, calcium, iron, and vitamins B6, B12, C, and E. If these quotes sound familiar, it may be because you’ve read them here previously. It’s so important that I think it bears repeating: the simple act of parents and children sharing meals may be the key to a lot more than just better nutrition. Satter notes that as family meals and connectedness increase, school performance and self-esteem increase, while depression and substance abuse (cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana) decrease. “Children do better when they spend time with their parents and when they have a strong sense of family. Key to that connection is the family meal.”

These are busy times. As a father of three, a husband, a son, and an employee, I can relate. Parents and kids are stretched (and stressed) by many factors – work, school, the economy, world events, uncertainty, information overload, and on and on. My family

doesn't make it to the dinner table together every night, but we try. When we make it, it's a highlight of our week. When we miss, we try again the next day.

I challenge you to do the same.

Steve Baldwin, MS, RD can be reached at stbaldwin@hawthorne.k12.ca.us.