



Living Well Newsletter

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What's for dinner? Encouraging advice on how to prepare your family a healthy meal

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There is no way to escape this daily question. It is there whether spoken or not. It is there whether you have an answer or not. It is there whether you have time or not. The good news is your family will eat something for dinner. The bad news is it may not be the nourishing, delicious, healthy meal you want it to be. Sometimes this is okay. It may be pizza night or a special occasion, but it is not okay every night. To answer the "what's for dinner" question the way we all really want to answer it requires planning, organization, knowledge and a whole lot of determination.

Serving balanced and healthy meals to our children is as much a part of our daily parenting as teaching them how to read. Accepting and shouldering this responsibility can seem like a burden. Yet, when approached with the same zeal we have for providing the best education, the best opportunities, and in general the best life we can for our children, the task takes on a whole new meaning. With the benefit of their living longer and healthier lives resting in our hands, how can we not invest more time and energy into preparing meals?

So, how do we fit this into our already busy lives and still have time to actually be with our families? Thankfully, a lot of the work has been done for us! One of the easiest ways to serve healthy meals is to plan ahead with a weekly menu and shopping list. These can be found from a multitude of sources including websites such as fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org, choosemyplate.org, and jamieoliver.com. These can serve as models that can be

modified and edited to meet your family's tastes and needs. For example, if your kids have baseball practice during the typical dinner hour, choose a meal that can travel for the car or a picnic. Although it seems like a more rigid way of preparing meals, when coupled with a healthy dose of creativity it can work into a busy week. An added benefit of using this method is that it usually results in saving money. No more impulse buys and less eating out.

What happens if you plan and prepare and serve the healthy meal and your kids don't eat it? Picky eaters are often the cause of the vicious cycle that can ensue in unhealthy eating. The pizza, chicken nugget, mac 'n cheese, peanut butter and jelly diet is all too prevalent in our homes. There is such a strong parental instinct to feed our children that it can override the quality of food we offer them. In order to break the cycle, we must not offer an alternative dinner. Be prepared for them to eat nothing. Do not reinforce the negative behavior by harping on how they need to try new things and eat better. Instead, say a simple, more effective statement such as, "I made you this healthy dinner because I love you. I care about fueling your body so it can grow and be healthy." Nutritionally speaking, the effect of missing a few dinners is less important than the investment in changing their lifelong habits of healthy eating.

The next trick is to involve your family in the choices and preparation. Consider having your child



pick a new “vegetable of the week.” Have them learn the nutritional value and share it with the family. For older children, this can give them concrete evidence for why things are “healthy.” Next, choose a recipe that incorporates the food. Prepare the dish together; even young children can stir! This hands-on approach involves them in handling the food in a non-threatening way. There is no pressure to eat it and curiosity begins to build about what it might taste like. This begins to create a real relationship with the food and a sense of ownership about the dish as it is served. This often translates into an increased willingness to try the food. As the weeks pass, collect the recipes that your family likes and create your own family cookbook.

At the end of the day, what matters most is that our children are nourished – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Sometimes there will be a healthy dinner and sometimes there won’t be a healthy dinner. Do not get discouraged. It is like much of parenting, keep your perspective and your sense of humor and keep trying. And remember, the meals your kids will remember most will be the ones full of laughter and love.

For more information about Esse Health, please visit us on-line at www.essehealth.com.



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