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Food News Lifestyle

Family dinner - a miracle and a stress

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Becoming a parent eliminates your weekend lie-in, your sex life and your patience. It also signals the tragic end of the luxurious evening meal.

In its place is a mammoth daily event that requires meticulous planning, industrial-scale shopping, cooking amid hunger squeals and skirt-tugging - all in an ever-decreasing window of time.

The end result - a nutritious evening meal - is nothing short of a miracle.

But there's little time to pat yourself on the back. There's the clean-up to worry about, then homework, bath and bedtime stories.

Sydney mother of three Julie Jorstad says she and her husband Lange loved to cook before they had children.

"We shopped together and thought, 'Hmm, what shall we have tonight?' and we wandered up to the shop on a daily basis after work," she says.

"It's been a slow evolution to being a family of five who have to plan their menus. We can't be laissez-faire about it any more."

Denise Reichenbach, counsellor with Relationships Australia Queensland, says couples undergoing counselling often mention the stress caused by busy family evenings.

"It's about getting the dinner ready, the children in the bath, getting the children to bed, hoping they'll sleep, and then a couple may only have one or two hours together and that's not really a lot."

Reichenbach says dinnertime can be a potential source of conflict if one or both partners don't feel the couple is working as a team.

"It's important to sit down together and say, 'How can we make this enjoyable for everybody and how can we do it together?'"

In many couples, she says, one person is happy to take charge of the menu planning and cooking, provided his or her partner takes on other tasks.

"The other person might be better at washing laundry, let's say, or mowing the lawn. Every couple usually finds a way in which they negotiate the balance of tasks with each other. It only becomes a problem when they feel there isn't a balance there."

Often the issue centres on how the person who works (or works longer hours) can contribute more at home.

"Sometimes it can just be a minor task like coming home, having a shower and playing with kids until dinner is ready. That's all that's needed," says Reichenbach.

Jorstad says she despises the effort of creating the daily miracle of dinner so much that she has come up with a system to keep family life peaceful.

"It's quite rigorous," she says. "I sit down once every two weeks and I write the whole menu for what we're going to eat in the next two weeks, then I do the shop."

"It's crazy, completely meticulous and it's awful when I have to do it but then I get to cruise along for the two weeks and I just follow the list."

Jorstad says she draws on a big bank of personal recipes, mixing it up with seasonal produce.

"If dad gets home first he looks at the list, he knows what's on. If I get home first, I look at the list and I know what's on. Everything's in the fridge and it all goes to plan. We take the uncertainty out of it."

In between the two-week shops, Jorstad will supplement her supplies with a delivery of fresh bread, milk and produce from aussiefarmersdirect.com.

Sydney-based pediatric dietitian and mum-of-two Hanan Saleh agrees that planning meals ahead of time is key. She advises time-poor working parents to make the internet their best friend in planning daily meals that are easy and healthy.

"Taste.com.au has quick meals that you can put together, and Jamie Oliver comes up with 15-minute meals now. Some mums are good at planning the week and they'll print off recipes and try their best."

If you don't always have time to be inspirational, then be organised, Saleh says. Cook the night before a busy work day, use leftovers, or cook in batches at the weekends and freeze

meals.

Takeaway may sometimes be a faster and less stressful option, but avoid it if you can, Saleh says. Childhood obesity is rising dramatically, and many young children are already at risk of cholesterol problems.

When all Jorstad's plans fall over, "that's when you get creative", she says.

"That's when you say, you know what, eggs are good for dinner. And we'll have some carrot sticks, a couple of slices of cucumber and that's dinner.

"If you're really in trouble you just go to the corner shop and get some wraps and some beans and make burritos."

But for this Sydney mother, the most important thing is that, whatever else is going on, her three children sit down together and share a meal every night - whether or not she and her husband join them.

"I love to see them sitting down eating a balanced, healthy meal, even if it's just something I threw together," she says.

"When they're enjoying it and they're happy and I know it's good for them, it's like, `Yay thumbs up, that's good!'"

FAST, HEALTHY RECIPES

When time is lacking and little tummies are rumbling, whip up one of these quick and nutritious dinner ideas from dietitian Hanan Saleh:

1. Mini tuna or leftover chicken and salad subs (made with baby rolls, grated carrot, lettuce, tomato and low-fat mayo).
2. Five-vegetable spaghetti bolognese (try carrot, onion, zucchini, cherry tomatoes and baby spinach leaves) with lean beef mince. This can also be frozen for later.
3. Kofta lamb meatballs and brown rice. Can also be frozen.
4. Chicken schnitzel made with crumbed chicken tenderloins and baked potatoes with herbs, served with peas and corn.
5. Tuna and corn salad with home-made croutons.
6. Chicken on a stick (chicken kebabs) served with sweet-potato chips and salad.
7. Crumbed fish fingers and steamed vegetables (peas, corn, carrot and broccoli).

8. Vegetable fritters (using 500g packet mixed frozen vegetables; 1/3 cup self-raising flour; 3 eggs, lightly beaten; 1/3 cup grated reduced-fat tasty cheese; 1 1/2 tbsp olive oil).
9. Beef or chicken burritos.
10. Mini-crumpet pizzas using low-fat cheese, mushrooms, pineapple, chicken mince or tuna - or try using mountain bread as a pizza base.
11. Chicken and vegetable soup with pasta, pumpkin, potato and leek or carrot. Can be frozen.
12. Cook a family-size packet of brown rice in the microwave, stir through tuna or stir-fried teriyaki chicken (you can add the teriyaki sauce to the chicken during the stir-frying, no need to pre-marinate), add baby spinach leaves peas or corn (frozen then steamed).

Source: Pediatric dietitian Hanan Saleh (thefoodexpert.com)

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