

# A FUN FAMILY FEAST

Mealtimes are much more than a way to provide nourishment for the body. Mealtimes also provide a great opportunity for families to enjoy each other!

Families laugh together, share their problems, and help each other grow through the casual conversation they enjoy as they sit around the dinner table. Children who are included in these conversations learn language, learn about their own family's culture, and learn about how the world works. A recent study of college honors students showed that families who eat meals together actually raise children who do better in school!

Extended families often gather for special meals at holiday times. These events are very important in helping children get a sense of who they are. As they listen to cousins and uncles and grandmas share funny stories about the past, children gain security from the sense of belonging to others in their families.

In this day and age, many families "eat and run" as they hurry from one activity to another. Often, even when they are home together, they eat separately or eat watching television. These families may be getting the nutrition they need, but they are missing the important social contacts they need from each other.

**Try this: At least once a week, have your family all sit down together and eat a meal with no TV and radio. You may be amazed at the great conversation that follows!**

Children can learn a great deal from helping with food preparation. Each step of the process (buying groceries, putting away food, preparing food, setting the table, and cleaning up) provides opportunities for helping children learn. And they may turn out to be quite helpful, too! Here are some ways preschoolers learn from table setting and grocery shopping, for example:

## Setting the Table

Let toddlers carry unbreakables such as napkins or place mats to the table.

Encourage older preschoolers to help you count out how many people will be eating and how many plates and cups you need. This helps with the concept of number: children will learn to place one of each item for each person.

Children three to five-years-old will enjoy folding napkins into different shapes. Younger children will enjoy it, too, if you don't mind some napkins being crumpled into balls or torn into shreds.

Setting the table is a perfect opportunity for older preschoolers to begin learning about "right" and "left" as they set out the silverware.

## Going to the Supermarket

Name the foods you see. Words such as banana, cashew, broccoli, and cinnamon are fun to say.

Children two to five-years-old enjoy having their own shopping list. You may want to illustrate the list or have children draw a picture of the item they are going to look for. If the item is easy to reach and unbreakable, let your child take it from the shelf and place it in your cart or basket.

Encourage children to help you count pears, peaches, or apples as you take turns dropping them in a bag.

The produce department presents countless opportunities to categorize by size, shape and color.

Point out signs hanging over the aisles, labels on cans, print on boxes to children beginning to identify letters and sound out words.

Discussions about the fact that Denise likes cauliflower and Sammy doesn't convey the important message that people are unique individuals – each to be respected for who they are.