

By Barbara Holden  
Special to My Life

“If I could wave a magic wand to make a dent in our nation's substance abuse problem, I would make sure that every child in America had dinner with his or her parents at least five times a week,” said The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse chairman Joseph A. Califano, Jr.

That’s a pretty powerful statement. But the simple act of brining your family around the dinner table for food and conversation makes your children less likely to smoke, drink or take drugs.

Children of families who eat together are smarter, stronger, healthier, too.

Tangible benefits of family mealtime are so meaningful that Purdue University Center for Families created an entire website and public awareness campaign devoted to spreading the word.

“Children who eat with their families simply do better in school,” the Center for Families says. “Talking at meals teaches young children new words, how to express ideas, and how to talk with others.”

The Center for Families also says that little ones who dine with their families eat better, learn better eating habits, and are less likely to develop eating disorders.

And the fruit of family mealtime time doesn’t end there. “Children who eat with their parents are also less likely to get into fights, become sexually active or commit suicide.”

A recent survey found that 80 percent of families value mealtime together, but that only 33 percent of those them successfully achieve daily family meals.

Clearly our intentions are good; the problem is that mealtime sneaks up on many of us. We are pressed for time and much too tired to herd cats around a dinner table. Besides, our family is still having a meal together when we are in the same room watching TV, right?

Wrong, says the US Dept of Human Services. “Family mealtime is an opportunity to share ideas and find out ‘what's happening.’ It’s a way for a parent to be involved, discuss rules, monitor activities and friends, and be a good role model.”

In other words, TV mealtime doesn’t have the same benefits as family mealtime because you aren’t speaking to each other. Even the TV folks agree.

“The benefits that come from family dining are endless,” said Larry W. Jones, President, TV Land and Nick at Nite. “The Center for Families study, once again, shows us the

emotional and social benefits that come from taking the time to sit down and share a meal as a family.”

“From lessening the risk of substance abuse to increasing the likelihood of academic success, this is a serious wake-up call to parents across the country to make the time and to stay engaged.”

Experts agree that if you are going to make family mealtime a priority, you’ve got to plan ahead. If possible, try to avoid evening work hours and multiple evening meetings, exercise workouts and other personal, social, and civic commitments around dinnertime.

Ideally, every meal is a family meal, but you may need to start out slowly by setting aside one night a week to come together around the table. Once you get the hang of one night a week, aim for two, and so on until eating together every night of the week is routine.

“Dinners make a difference!” exclaims the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. “What your kids really want around the dinner table is you.”

Family mealtime is no silver bullet. Dining together won’t guarantee your child will make straight A’s nor will it singlehandedly solve our nation’s drug, health or truancy issues. What it will do is keep you engaged in your child’s development by talking, making eye contact, building trust – the list goes on and on.

Without question, family mealtime has been shown to strengthen families and boost childhood development. It is up to you to sustain and pass down this valued family ritual.

*Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to [www.theurbanchildinstitute.org](http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org) or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.*