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NUTRITION SEGMENT SEPTEMBER 10, 2007: EATING TOGETHER BENEFITS THE BROOD

If you think you're too busy to eat together as a family, think again. The family that eats together stays healthier. Research has shown that eating together influences family communications, improves nutritional intake and builds character and social development. Below are benefits of family meals and solutions to barriers in getting meals on the table.

BENEFITS:

- **HEALTHIER EATERS:** Eating together not only strengthens family ties, it strengthens the family physically and nutritionally. Recent studies have shown children that eat together as families develop healthier habits that can last a lifetime. Children consume more fruits and vegetables, calcium, fiber, iron and eat less fat overall when the family eats together.
- **MODEL HEALTHY BEHAVIORS:** When families cook and eat meals together, there is more control over the quality and quantity of food choices. Children learn early to model their parents and follow their lead – even though sometimes it doesn't feel like it. If healthy eating is important to the family, children will live it too. They learn to regulate portion size according to hunger and fullness and try new and different foods. All of these behaviors foster healthy attitudes toward food.
- **LEARN LIFE SKILLS:** The kitchen also provides an opportunity to learn life skills like cooking and cleaning - qualities that become more important later in life.

SOLUTIONS TO BARRIERS:

- **PLANNING:** One way to maximize time is to plan 3 meals during the week and stretch them into 6 meals. Live by the saying, "Cook it once, use it twice." The family doesn't always have to eat at home to eat together. Have dinner together on the soccer field during practice or on the softball bleachers, pick up healthy sandwiches and stop at a park on the way home from a game, practice or a concert. Be creative and celebrate with food.
- **PICKINESS:** Another challenge is that not everyone likes the same food. One idea is to turn new foods into family celebrations and offer them often. Create family traditions from Indian cuisine on Friday night to Saturday fondue to Sunday brunch.
- **CHORE OF COOKING:** Another challenge is that dinner preparation takes longer than eating the meal itself. There are numerous nutritious meals that can be done in 20 minutes. Choose five favorites and learn them by heart to rescue your dinner. Learn to cook efficiently and eat slowly so you can spend more time around the dinner table instead of behind the kitchen stove. Rely on meals that pack a mixture of food in one dish like fajitas, omelets, stir fry or pizza.

QUICK, EASY PITA PIZZA

Choose a pizza theme, such as Greek. Set out a pile of whole wheat pitas and pizza toppings such as pre-made hummus, chopped tomatoes, sliced black olives, green peppers and crumbled feta cheese. Have each family member make their own pizza and bake it under the broiler until crispy.

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