

m e m o

DATE: November 4, 2020
TO: WIC Coordinators and LA Staff
FROM: Carole Kelnhofer, Training Coordinator
SUBJECT: Encouraging Family Mealtimes: Topic of the Month

With the ever growing reliance on technology controlling many aspects of our everyday lives, it has never been more important to promote family mealtimes than it is today. Families must compete with work, school, and other stressors of everyday life; they may find it hard to sit down together, let alone for a meal. The family mealtime is considered an instrumental part of strengthening families, improving nutrition, and facilitating child development.

Benefits of Family Mealtimes

- Eat more nutritious foods; a family can explore new foods together.
- Model healthy habits; children learn best from their caregivers.
- Eat the right amount; structured mealtimes aid in portion control.
- Spend time together; helps a family bond and build strong relationships.
- Create a sense of security; routines set the expectation of time together.
- Develop social skills; children learn to socialize (communicate) with others.
- Learn about one's culture; pass down family values, traditions, and foods.

Family mealtime has been described as everyone in a home sitting down and enjoying a meal together. In some families this may be two individuals, while for others it may be multiple members of close and extended friends and family. Regardless of what makes up one's "family", family mealtimes have been shown to increase the health and happiness for each member. Eating meals together has been associated with developing a positive relationship with food.

By creating the routine of regular family mealtimes, caregivers teach children what is expected. Children thrive on consistency; this can help eliminate the power struggle that comes with many daily activities. Additionally, by including everyone in the meal preparation, children learn new skills as they master the tasks assigned to them.

WIC's Role

The role of WIC is to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutrition risk. It is easy to feel like participants arrive at WIC only to receive the benefits of the food package. To begin to understand our participants and their needs, it is

important to establish a connection and to gain their trust. Asking for help can leave participants feeling vulnerable. We want participants to feel safe to share information and know that everything will be kept confidential.

The questions asked during the nutrition assessment may feel intrusive to some participants. Our ability to offer support is limited to the knowledge we gain during the assessment process. WIC does this by completing the nutrition assessment and then providing education that best fits an individual's need.

We can best support our participants by:

- ✓ Creating a safe and welcoming environment.
- ✓ Asking questions and listening without judgement.
- ✓ Affirming responses and reflecting by acknowledging concerns.
- ✓ Providing appropriate support based on an individualized need.

Questions to Ask Participants

It is vital that you ask the right questions when completing the nutrition assessment in order to determine how best to support the family. Asking open-ended questions helps get the participant talking and increases the opportunity to share information that best fits their need.

- What makes up your family? (What does your family look like?)
- Who does the shopping/cooking for your family?
- Do you have food restrictions for any/all members of your family?
- What does a typical mealtime look like for your family?
- What makes you the most happy about mealtimes at home?
- Tell me what makes mealtime challenging?
- What would help make family mealtimes more manageable?
- How often could you plan regular mealtimes for your family to enjoy together?

Resources to Offer Support

Finding the right resources for families to make mealtime a reality is essential. Once staff have identified where the family is struggling, it will be easier to direct them to the appropriate resource. Some examples include:

- **Education:** WIC [Nutrition Information Cards](#) (Enjoy Family Meals, Feed with Confidence, & Mealtime Routines); [WIChealth.org](#) (Healthy Families & Meal Planning); [The Family Dinner Project](#); [Ellyn Satter Institute](#); [USDA Choose My Plate: Families](#); [Family Meals Movement](#)
- **County Resources:** [Supplementation Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP); [ApplyMN](#)

- **Community Resources:** [Minnesota Food Pantries](#); [Hunger Solutions](#); [Feeding America: Hunger in Minnesota](#)

Tips for Families

Making dinner time fun and rewarding is one strategy to get members to the table and keep them there! For many families, offering tips will be adequate enough to get them started or keep them going.

- Make mealtime a priority by developing a routine.
- Any food shared together can be a family meal; it doesn't have to be "healthy" or "homemade" to call it a meal.
 - A frozen pizza and a glass a milk is also a meal!
- Involve each member in meal planning, preparation, and clean-up.
- Find a space where you can enjoy mealtime together; if you don't have a table, you can find another area where the family can sit together to eat.
- Turn off technology to help keep the focus on your time together.
- Keep conversation light and stress-free; allow each member time to talk.
 - [The Family Dinner Project](#) has some great conversation starters; simply go to the conversation tab to find featured topics or search by age and/or theme for ideas.
- Try not to stress when food is refused; just focus on your time together.
- Don't watch the clock; take your time and enjoy your meal!

Staff Exercise

When sharing resources with participants, it is important to be familiar with what you are offering. Take the time to read through the WIC nutrition education cards, log into WIChealth.org, and be aware of resources available to families in your geographical area. Often what holds families back from routine family mealtimes can be a lack of food in the home or limited time to prepare meals! WIC can use the many resources available to assist families in meeting their goals.

Exercise #1: Read through the nutrition education cards relating to improving family meals/mealtimes. Also, make sure you can direct participants to the location of the nutrition education materials on their computer, tablet, or mobile device (*HINT: WIC app*).

Exercise #2: Log onto WIChealth.org and check out the lessons available to participants that pertain to making mealtimes easier. Also, make sure you can direct participants to the location of WIChealth.org from their computer, tablet, or mobile device (*HINT: WIC app*).

Exercise #3: Do some research; find out what services are available to participants in your geographical area that could improve their access to foods. To best serve participants, be sure you understand what is expected when they call or apply for these services so you can share this information with them.

Finally, share what you have learned! Once you have determined how best you can support your participant and their family, share the information you have learned. Additionally, when you learn about new or existing resources for families, be sure to pass it along to your co-workers.

Continue to send any topic suggestions or feedback to carole.kelhofer@state.mn.us or your State WIC Consultant.

References - Complete Listing of Hyperlinks

Nutrition Information

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/nutrition/morenutinfo.html>)

WIChealth.org (<https://www.wichealth.org/>)

The Family Dinner Project (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/>)

Ellyn Satter Institute (<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/>)

USDA Choose My Plate: Families (<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/browse-by-audience/view-all-audiences/families>)

Family Meals Movement (<https://www.fmi.org/family-meals-movement/meals-matter>)

Supplementation Nutrition Assistance Program (<https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/adults/economic-assistance/food-nutrition/programs-and-services/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program.jsp>)

ApplyMN (<https://applymn.dhs.mn.gov/online-app-web/spring/public/process-login?execution=e1s1>)

Minnesota Food Pantries (<https://www.foodpantries.org/st/minnesota>)

Hunger Solutions (<https://www.hungersolutions.org/find-help/>)

Feeding America: Hunger in Minnesota (<https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/minnesota>)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 85 E 7th Place, PO BOX 64882, ST PAUL MN 55164-0882; 651-201-4444, wic.health@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 651-201-444