

Joan Lunden Encourages Families To Cook Up Some Conversation At Dinner Time

(NAPSA)—A nationwide survey confirms the family dinner is alive and well—in fact, 80 percent of families surveyed reported eating dinner together at least five times each week. However, for three out of four American families, the focus is likely to be on the television rather than talking to each other. As many Americans would likely agree, it's important now more than ever to enjoy meals as a family while reconnecting through conversation at the table.



Joan Lunden

Joan Lunden, television journalist, author, mother of three and long-time family advocate, is spearheading National Eat Dinner Together Week, which was established by the National Pork Board in 1996 to help raise awareness of the importance of mealtime as a forum for developing family connections.

“Gathering together for a home-cooked meal shows family members that you care about them,” says Lunden. “It’s also a perfect venue for busy families to talk about what’s going on in everyone’s lives and to get to know each other as individuals.”

Benefits Beyond The Dinner Table

The idea of family meals as a forum for bonding and warm conversation has benefits that extend far beyond the dinner table,

according to William Doherty, Ph.D., director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Center at the University of Minnesota. Doherty is also the author of *The Intentional Family: Simply Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties* and co-founder of Family Life 1st, an organization committed to making family time a priority.

“Making time for family dinners is one of the best ways to show kids that maintaining connections with other family members is a priority,” says Doherty. “Research shows that spending time together as a family, including over meals, is crucial to the overall well-being of children when it comes to developing healthy eating habits and progressing in school.”

Doherty suggests families take an “intentional” approach to family dinner, meaning that dinner becomes a family ritual that focuses on connecting through positive interaction without distractions, like the television.

“Demonstrate to family members that dinnertime is about togetherness and catching up with each other, rather than the evening news,” says Doherty.

So Much To Say

Once the distractions have been eliminated, the challenge for many

families is discovering topics of conversation that will interest and engage the entire family.

Lunden draws on the skills she learned as a journalist to get beyond ordinary conversations and spark more meaningful discussions with her family at the dinner table.

“Start by doing your homework—learn about the topics that interest your family members outside of work and school,” says Lunden. Then, Lunden recommends asking creative questions that not only get your children’s attention, but require more than a “yes” or “no” answer. Allow every member of the family to contribute to the conversation honestly and freely.

“Parents need to strike a balance between the topics they want to talk to their children about and topics their kids want to discuss,” says Lunden. “I think it’s just as important—maybe even more important—to listen.”

Cookin’ Up Conversation At Dinner

To help jump-start mealtime discussion, the National Pork Board offers a free *Cookin’ Up Conversation* brochure, which provides busy families with tools to take an “intentional” approach to dinner and includes thought-provoking question cards to spark dinnertime conversation. The brochure and more delicious, easy-to-prepare recipes are available online at otherwhite.meat.com or by mailing a letter-size, self-addressed stamped envelope to *Cookin’ Up Conversation*, PO Box 9114, Des Moines, IA, 50306.

