

You can hate to cook and still love family dinner

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In my role as a consultant nutritionist to Siletz Tribal Head Start, I offer information for families. This topic of family dinners is an important key to health. This article is extracted from drgreene.com/perspectives/you-can-hate-to-cook-and-still-love-family-dinner/. Check out the easy stew recipe to take the pressure off preparation.

Of course, it's food that gets everyone to the table, but isn't it the conversation and the stories that keep us there?

The many documented benefits of family dinners – lower rates of depression, substance abuse and stress, and higher achievement scores, positive mood and self-esteem – don't derive from how many hours you spend cooking the dinner and it doesn't matter if you use heirloom parsnips. No, it's almost certainly the conversation around the table that we have to thank for all those benefits to our health and well-being.

Conversation comes in several different flavors – questions that ask about the day, storytelling and games.

Questions about the say

A steady diet of “how was your day” questions can be tedious for both asker and responder, like being served chicken night after night. Just as it's interesting to switch up your menu, here are a few questions to add some variety to dinner talk.

- Rose, thorn and bud – Ask each family member to share something positive or funny (the rose), something negative or challenging (the thorn) and something they hope will happen tomorrow (the bud).
- Two truths and a lie, (or a wish) – Ask each family member to share two things that actually happened during the day and one that either didn't happen or they wish had happened. The other family members try to guess the one that isn't true.

- Conversation jar – On slips of paper, write a whole slew of questions. Then stuff them in a jar that sits in the middle of the table. Each person can pull one out and answer it. Other family members may want to answer the same question or pull out another slip. Here are some examples to get you started: What character in a book or movie would you like as a friend? What are two things you feel grateful for today? If you are feeling sad, what can someone do to make you feel better? If you had three wishes, what would they be? What is your favorite thing to do outside? If you could be one age for the rest of your life, what age would that be?

For many more examples, check out thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation-2/conversation-starters/.

Telling stories

No matter what age we are, telling stories, often with the input of others, is the primary way we make sense of the world. Families used to have lots of opportunities to tell stories – around the fire, while doing needlepoint or in long letters.

But in 21st century America, the primary place where families get to share their stories is at the dinner table.

According to several studies, storytelling has a positive connection to children's well-being – kids who know stories about their family history have higher self-esteem and a greater capacity to bounce back from the slings and arrows of everyday life. Kids who know family stories feel connected to something bigger than themselves.

You can tell stories about:

- How you chose your child's name
- A holiday or celebration
- When you were the same age as your child
- A pet's mischief or “humanness”
- Overcoming a challenge – a first job, a mishap at an interview, a work success

- How your family first came to this country, city or neighborhood
- A love affair or where and how your parents met
- Something funny or ridiculous
- When you learned an important life lesson
- How you learned a family recipe

Don't be afraid to tell stories about failures and mishaps, especially if they were ultimately overcome. Making a silk purse out of a sow's ear or lemonade out of lemons are often the most powerful family stories.

Playing games at the table

- Twenty questions about a family memory: Have one family member think of a family memory, like the time our dog ate 49 chocolate chip cookies. Then, everyone else asks yes/no questions to try to guess the memory. Did it happen during a holiday? Was everyone in the family there? Were we laughing, scared, sad? Did it involve food? Whoever guesses the right answer first gets to go next. This is a great game for finding out what experiences your kids are holding on to.
- Would you rather? Take turns asking each person “Would you rather ...” and then finish the sentence with a ridiculous or thought-provoking choice like, “... eat a bowl of worms or a bowl of crickets? ... live in the future or in the past ... speak every language or play every musical instrument? ... be able to fly or be invisible?” Once you get started on this one, kids usually will make up their own silly questions.
- Fruit and vegetable game: I can play this game by the hour (and have). One family member (the leader of the round) thinks of a person known by everyone at the table. Then others ask the leader metaphorical questions to try to guess the person. For example, “If this person were a vegetable, what vegetable would he or she be?” or “If he or she were a fruit, or an animal, or a color, which would he or she be?” The idea is to stick to figurative rather than literal thinking. In other words, the leader will answer in terms of how the individual's personality might be manifested in another form rather than answering in terms of the person's actual favorite vegetable to eat or color to wear. Whoever guesses the person first goes next as the leader.
- Love family dinner: With all of these table talk suggestions, the point is to have fun and encourage conversation so that dinnertime is a relaxing time when everyone talks. As a bonus, perhaps your kids will linger longer or you will discover something new about each other.

For more games, conversation starters and tips on how to get your kids talking, check out my new book, *Home for Dinner: Mixing Food, Fun, and Conversation for a Happier Family and Healthier Kid* (Amazon 2015).

Sweet Potato & Lentil Stew

- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 4 cups vegetable broth
- 3 cups or 1 1/4 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 1 1/2 cups lentils, rinsed
- 3 medium carrots, 1-inch pieces
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 4 each garlic cloves, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin, ground
- 1/4 teaspoon ginger, ground
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne, ground
- 1/4 cup fresh cilantro or parsley, minced
- Salt & pepper to taste

Combine the first 10 ingredients in a 4-5 quart slow cooker. Cook on low for 5-6 hours or until vegetables are tender. This also can be done on a stovetop in a shorter time.

When fully cooked, add fresh chopped cilantro and/or parsley and adjust seasonings. If you like it hot, pepper sauce (like Tabasco) is nice.

Stuffed Winter Squash*

This is a winter meal that can be made with many variations. Be flexible and creative with what is available.

Filling

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/4 cup red onions
- 1 tablespoons curry
- 1/2 each green tart apple, such as Granny Smith, diced
- 1 stalk celery, chopped
- 1-2 tablespoons raisins or infused cranberries
- 1 1/2 cup cooked brown rice**
- 1 1/2 cup cooked lentils**
- 1-2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- Salt to taste
- Garnish with chutney and fresh cilantro, chopped

*Squash: Start with acorn squash or any other type that suits your fancy. Choose the number of units and size you want to serve as halves or round slices. Slice and place face down on a baking dish. For variation you could slice the squash and serve the filling over sliced squash as the beautiful, colorful bed.

Bake squash until tender to pierce with a fork; can take up to 1 hour at 350 F depending on the squash type and size. When making this in a hurry, squash can be cooked in the microwave. Heat face down until tender.

Filling: Cook brown rice and lentils or use leftovers. **Lentils and rice can be cooked together in a pan or rice cooker. Use 3/4 cup of each and 3 cups water.

Meanwhile, add cooking oil to pan and sauté onions, curry and sweet spices. Add apple, celery and raisins or other dried fruit to pan while continuing to sauté. Stir in brown rice and lentils. Adjust flavor as needed with balsamic vinegar and salt.

Arrange dish with filled-in squash and serve with chutney and fresh cilantro. Don't forget to serve with colorful greens.

If you have not sent in an application for your child to attend **Siletz Tribal Head Start**, it's not too late. Call 541-444-2532 or 800-922-1399 to request that an application be sent to you.

Applications also are available on the Tribal website (ctsi.nsn.us) and at the Siletz, Salem and Portland area offices.

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