

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

By: Alisha Fisher

K-State Research and Extension Greenwood County

Family and Community Wellness Extension Agent

*“The Importance of Family Meal Time”*

The environment in which a child learns to eat significantly impacts their eating habits, lifestyle, and overall well-being. Sharing meals as a family encourages healthier eating patterns, improves mood, and supports mental health. For children under 13, regular family meals are associated with fewer behavioral issues and emotional outbursts. Teenagers benefit as well, showing lower rates of substance use, fewer depressive symptoms, and better academic performance. Adults also benefit from family meals enjoying improved social and emotional well-being.

Family meals don't need to be limited to dinner; they can happen anytime that fits your schedule, including breakfast, lunch, or snack. These meals can include extended family members, family friends, and fictive kin (non-biological family members). All these relationships play essential functional and emotional roles. The key is consistency and togetherness. Sitting down together creates an opportunity to connect, share, and model healthy behaviors.

To ensure meals are nutritionally balanced, aim to include three of the five MyPlate food groups at every meal:

**Fruits and Vegetables:** These should make up half the plate.

**Grains:** Choose whole grains whenever possible.

**Protein:** Opt for lean sources like chicken, fish, 93% lean ground beef, and beans.

**Dairy:** Include options such as milk, cheese, or yogurt.

Family meals should be enjoyable and stress-free. Keep conversations lighthearted and engaging by asking open-ended questions. Use this time to talk about nutrition and identify the different food groups on the plate. Children learn by observing, so demonstrate healthy eating habits yourself. If you want your child to eat vegetables, make sure you're eating them too! Serve children the same meal as the rest of the family but avoid forcing them to eat something they dislike. It may take 10-15 exposures to a new food before a child is willing to try it. Always include at least one familiar food in the meal to help them feel comfortable. To encourage children to try new foods, involve them in meal planning and grocery shopping. Let them choose between options like broccoli or carrots to give them a sense of control and engagement in what they're eating.

Follow the “Division of Responsibility in Feeding”

**Parents** are responsible for deciding *what*, *when*, and *where* the family eats.

**Children** decide *how much* of the provided food they will eat.

Family meals don’t just provide nutritional benefits; they foster emotional connection, teach valuable habits, and strengthen relationships. By offering healthy options and creating a supportive environment, you can help children develop lifelong healthy eating habits while building stronger family bonds.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.

Save the date for upcoming programs related to cattle and farm management! Feb. 20 will be a “Heifer Development & Risk Management” meeting with KSRE Cow-Calf Specialist Dr. Jason Warner. The meeting will be at the Yates Center Community Building, starting at 6 p.m., with a meal and program to follow at 6:30 p.m. Please contact the office to RSVP.

Looking ahead, March 13 will cover "Livestock Watering Systems." More details coming soon!