



Growing up as the youngest of six siblings, the daily evening meal was non-negotiable. If we were home, we had to be there to eat altogether. Dragging myself from whatever engrossing book I was reading to join my family at the table was often the last thing I wanted to do, not to mention enduring the humiliation of squabbles, snitching and sub-table-leg-kicking that inevitably happens between siblings! The opportunities this gave me to hone calculated and subtle revenge did not go amiss on these occasions, rightfully incurring the full and heavy weight of the wrath of my poor parents upon me!

But seriously, though mealtimes in our house growing up were probably a little less than peaceful, I did really miss them when I left home. I recently joined my brother and his family for dinner, and it reminded me of all the reasons why I am now glad that we had regular family meals. When I started to think about it, I was amazed at all the benefits I gained from such a simple family habit. The following is a list that reflects my favorite reasons for having family meal times. I know that every family is different and that family mealtimes are not always possible, but I hope that this list inspires you to try instigating them if you can, and to keep persevering in them if you already have them, but are getting sick of them!

1. Confidence

One of the advantages of growing up the youngest of a large family was being part of conversations that were a little out of reach of my understanding. As I grew up, the dinner table became a good place to test the waters of my own rhetoric and humor. Siblings are your greatest critics, after all. It set us up so well for heading out into more public social settings, teaching us how to hold our own, argue our corner, or how to gracefully recede when you are in the wrong. In short, family dinner times taught us confidence in a comfortable setting.

2. How to Listen

A small family dinner table with any combination of eight or less people around it is quite an intense place. We once had a visitor join us for dinner who told us afterwards that he

had been trying to work out the system for who was allowed to speak when. We laughed; there wasn't one. We had just been taught really well how to listen. I'm not saying that we always listened attentively or with care, but we enjoyed good conversations and relished the fun of keeping those conversations afloat. Family meals taught us to listen well in order to respond well, to know when to speak in a group and when to keep quiet, to know what to say to console, and definitely what not to say, because you sure as heck learn the hard way when you tell your sibling the wrong thing at the wrong time.

3. How to Know Your Place

One oft-repeated phrase that my mother gently used to use on me when I was little and getting too rowdy at the end of the table, with my sippy cup and teddy-bear teaspoon, was "pipe down Ruth!" It was a well-enforced rule that no one child was allowed to dominate the conversation at the dinner table, and it taught me an important lesson: in life, you will not be the most important person in the room, even if you like to think you are. That in turn taught me that we don't go into social situations to inflate our own egos, but to reach out to others, to make others feel comfortable, welcomed and respected, and to listen to others as well as to talk ourselves.

4. How to Get Along with People You Don't Like

There are unavoidable situations in life where we have to work, or make things work, with people we don't like. An excellent introduction to this was the daily meals of sitting side by side with the sibling you least got on with at the time. No family is perfect and I had long childhood feuds with various different siblings until we shuffled down together. Making courteous conversation, passing the dishes around the table, listening to another's problems, day in, day out, with a sibling you didn't get along with was excellent training for the adult moments in life that really matter when you have to collaborate with someone you don't like.

5. What it Feels like to be part of a Community

Whether I knew it or not at the time, coming together as a family at the end of each day was incredibly reassuring as a child. No matter how bad my day at school had been, there was a place where I knew I could come back to to share my worries, be cheered up by my siblings jokes, or gain some perspective on my problems when I shared them with my family. My older siblings, being older and wiser, had (genuinely) good advice to share, and my parents subtly encouraged us to share our problems and advice in turn. We shared good times and bad times around that table, and the original "safe-space", if you like, was routinely there each day to be made the most of. After all, that is the epitome of the point of the family!

6. Table Manners and General Etiquette

I've been in no rush to mention this because I think these go without saying, but it did us no harm growing up to know how to eat politely, use the right cutlery, try food that we didn't like, learn how to not be rude about food other people have cooked us! (Sorry, mum!), and manage to juggle a conversation and food at the same time so that we were prepared for formal occasions, fancy restaurants, important work events, or similar occasions as we got older.

7. How to Let the Good Times Roll

Family mealtimes taught me that meals were a communal occasion, that sharing food and conversation was fun and worth making a fuss of and an effort over. Yes, we argued, squabbled, drove our parents to distraction, made meals hard work when they didn't need to be, but that pales into insignificance for all the mealtimes that were full of laughter, consolation, warmth and fun. There were times, even when we were little, when it was hard to wrap up the meal and start clearing away because we were all enjoying ourselves so much.

We learned how to celebrate well, and how to make a special occasion truly special.

If you want another perspective on the subject of family mealtimes, check out this excellent TedTalk from personal chef to Hollywood celebrities, Heidi Weinstein, as she explains how she prioritized family mealtimes even through the most stressful times in her life.