In many households across America, eating dinner together as a family is becoming a lost art. Hectic work and school schedules keep some families from dining together, while other families have developed the habit of preparing a meal and then going to separate rooms of the house to eat.

Regardless of the reason, families who don't regularly eat together are missing a valuable opportunity to communicate and strengthen relationships. Sitting down together for a meal is a great way to check in with other family members and find out what's happening in their lives.

Also, research studies indicate that eating together as a family offers several positive benefits for children. For example, in a study reported in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, the diets of children in families who regularly ate meals together were higher in calcium, iron, folate, fiber and several vitamins compared to the diets of children in families who usually didn't eat meals together.

The story was the same in a nationwide survey of 18,000 adolescents reported in the Journal of Adolescent Health. Adolescents who generally ate their evening meal with one or more parents present ate more fruits, vegetables and dairy products compared with those who usually did not have a parent present at the dinner meal. Other studies have shown that children who eat dinner with their families every night of the week are less likely to drink alcohol, smoke, get into fights, use illegal drugs or be suspended from school than kids who don't usually eat dinner with their families.

Teens may turn up their noses at the prospect of a family meal - not surprising because they're trying to establish independence. Yet studies find that teens still want their parents' advice and counsel, so use mealtime as a chance to reconnect. Also, consider trying these strategies:

* Allow your teen to invite a friend to dinner.
* Involve your teen in meal planning and preparation.
* Keep mealtime calm and congenial - no lectures or arguing.

Family mealtimes don't have to consist of a seven-course meal. Good conversation can happen just as easily over soup and sandwiches. The point is for family members to take time out of the day to reconnect with one another.

It's easy for food to become a source of conflict. Parents might find themselves bargaining or bribing kids so they eat the healthy food in front of them. A better strategy is to give kids some control, but to also limit the kind of foods available at home.

To make the most of your family mealtimes, try the following ideas:

* On Sunday, compare each family member's schedule for the upcoming week and select meals when everyone can eat together.
* If work or school schedules regularly interfere with eating dinner together, pick another
mealtime, such as breakfast.
* Ask your children to help select menus as well as prepare meals. Studies suggest that, when children are involved in meal planning and preparation, they are more likely to eat those meals.
* Limit distractions during mealtime by turning off the television and/or radio before sitting own.
* If the phone rings while you're eating, let the answering machine get it. Phone calls can always be returned later.
* Keep the conversation positive, and give everyone a chance to share his or her thoughts. Try talking about what happened at school or work, current events, plans for the weekend, sports and so forth.
* Remember that children generally take more time to eat than adults. Instead of rushing through the meal and getting up immediately to start cleaning, take your time and spend a few extra minutes at the table.

Sources: Colorado Cooperative Extension
www.kidshealth.org

**Chocolate Peanut Butter Cookies**

1 cup chunky peanut butter  
1/4 cup canola oil  
3/4 cup packed brown sugar  
½ cup sugar  
2 eggs  
1 tablespoon vanilla extract  
1 cup all-purpose flour  
1/3 cup baking cocoa  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ cup miniature chocolate chips

In a large mixing bowl, combine peanut butter and oil. Add brown sugar and sugar. Mix well. Add eggs and vanilla. Mix well. Combine the flour, cocoa, baking soda and salt. Add to peanut butter mixture, mix until blended (dough will be sticky). Stir in chocolate chips.

Drop by rounded teaspoonfuls 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheets. Flatten slightly with a glass. Bake at 350 for 8 - 10 minutes or until set and tops are cracked. Cool for 2 minutes before removing to wire racks. Yield: 4 dozen