

## Leader Guide



### **Eat.Talk.Connect! Challenge November-January**

#### **What is the Eat.Talk.Connect Challenge?**

The Eat.Talk.Connect! Challenge is set for November-January. It is a time set aside in the Minnetonka Schools to encourage families to develop stronger connections by sharing meals together and engaging in meaningful conversation. This year the goal is to increase meals to at five times with a focus on the conversation.

#### **Why are connections important?**

Research confirms what we've always known intuitively. Connections to family and community are as important to our mental health and spiritual health as food is to our physical health. Connectedness to others and to life purpose is critical to one's health and success. Sharing meals with family several times every week helps build connections to each other and helps families to pass on their values. All family members benefit.

#### **What are the benefits of sharing meals?**

Family mealtimes are one of the best ways to build connections and to transfer values to the next generation. Research shows that children who share several meals, at least three meals every week, with their families – without the distraction of TV and other technology– benefit in the following ways:

- They incorporate family values into their lives.
- They have greater academic success – 40-50% of children eating regularly with their families have an A or B average.
- They eat more nutritionally and have fewer problems such as obesity, anorexia or bulimia.
- They experience less stress and are significantly less likely to be depressed.
- They are 40-50% less likely to smoke, use drugs or alcohol, or engage in sexual activity.

#### **What qualifies as “sharing meals”?**

“Sharing meals” is defined as when all or most family members who live in the same household sit down together to eat breakfast, lunch, dinner or any meal. For example, eating at a food court in the mall qualifies. In fact, anywhere qualifies, as long as most family members are gathered together and having a conversation with one another. And mealtime conversations should be fun and engaging ... disciplinary issues should be addressed at another time.

#### **Why schools should participate in Eat.Talk.Connect!**

Families in the Minnetonka School District are invited to participate in the Eat.Talk.Connect! program to help promote better mental health and connectedness. This is a community wide program aimed to build connections among families and friends by promoting the simple goal of taking time to be together during mealtime. Personal connections are critical to one's health and success. We all have a “hardwired” need to have deep and meaningful connections with each other. Eating meals together is one of the best ways to get connected.

**EAT.TALK.CONNECT® is used with permission from the Carver County Health Partnership**



## Strategies for Promoting Eat.Talk.Connect! at your School

- I. **Communicate and work with building Principal and staff to highlight the message.**
  - Encourage Principal involvement to get parents engaged (newsletter).
  - Share the Eat.Talk.Connect! message at a staff meeting
    - Encourage staff to incorporate Eat.Talk.Connect! in the school curriculum through classroom projects or as part of a homework connection.
- II. **Involve student leadership to assist with developing ideas and creating posters or displays.**
- III. **Submit articles for your school newsletter.**
- IV. **Include Eat.Talk.Connect! in the school day.** Include messages about the importance of family mealtime in morning announcements, homerooms, lunchrooms, and the staff lounge.
- V. **Advertise the Eat.Talk.Connect! Challenge period** on the school's outdoor marquee, place the message on the TV monitors with announcements or promote it during half time at sporting events.
- VI. **Plan** additional ways your school may want to support the Eat.Talk.Connect! message with special school events to build community. Ideas could include family dinner or ice cream social on back to school night, dessert at curriculum nights for parents to connect, pick a day to host *lunch bunch* when parent joins their child at school for lunch, set up a dining table display in the entry of school as a reminder, use a bulletin board area at school to get the message out, get parents to dust off the Conversation Talk Tins distributed to many families in past years.

## Classroom Extensions: Deepening the Message

**Eat. Talk. Connect!** offers a unique opportunity for students to apply their learning to a community-wide initiative. The following page contain suggestions for integrating **Eat.Talk.Connect!** into school curriculum. Please document and share your school's ideas so that other districts may benefit from your experiences.

### **Idea Bank:**

**PTO CONVERSATION QUESTIONS:** Turn a PTO gathering with a spaghetti dinner or pancake breakfast into an Eat.Talk.Connect! event by providing conversation questions at tables.

### **WACONIA SCHOOLS SPELL IT OUT!**

An elementary school in Waconia promoted the Challenge by turning their lunchroom wall into a billboard for Eat. Talk. Connect! Students colored favorite foods on paper plates to contribute to the effort. They placed the plates on the wall spelling out "Eat.Talk.Connect! " Adding recipes or conversation starters to the plates would provide an extension for older grades.

**CREATE A SCHOOL COOKBOOK:** Jonathan Elementary, Chaska District 112, asked students and families to submit favorite recipes for collection in an Eat.Talk.Connect! school cookbook. Students also sent in illustrations of family meals. The collection of recipes and drawings was compiled and published as a cookbook for all Jonathan Elementary families to enjoy.

**SHARING THE TABLE:** Sharing the table with diverse members of the school community offers an opportunity to exchange understanding of culture, food, and traditions shared at mealtimes. When it comes to school, ELL students are primarily receptors of education. Sharing the table offers an opportunity to exchange roles. Students become teachers by cooking a meal or snack from their family's heritage. Students and staff Eat.Talk.Connect! across cultures.

**STORIES OF THE TABLE:** Integrate curricular objectives into the Eat.Talk.Connect! by writing stories about family mealtimes. Consider collecting stories from all ages and abilities pertaining to family meals.

**PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS:** Whether created for broadcast on a community access channel or your school's morning TV, Eat. Talk. Connect! is a meaningful way to get kids involved in producing a PSA. Students learn about the importance of mealtime and share that knowledge with their peers.

**SPORTING EVENT ANNOUNCEMENTS:** Sporting events reach a large audience of dedicated parents and community members. Why not use this opportunity to share the message of Eat.Talk.Connect? Ask announcers to include messages of mealtime importance during breaks in the game

**RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM TIME:** Use responsive classroom time to generate ideas for family mealtimes, including conversation starters and ideas for helping at the table. Discuss ways in which students may expand their connections in school ... sit at a different table or with a new friend. How can mealtime at school be a time of connection for everyone?

**MODEL LUNCHROOM:** Add to your students' lunchroom experience by giving the standard dining area a little pizzazz. Model a welcoming, comforting atmosphere. Tablecloths or centerpieces could mark a special day. Victoria Elementary, District 112, has implemented "Music Mondays" when student musicians or local artists are invited to play during the lunch period. Or, perhaps one class could decorate tables for a partner class.

**TABLE CHALLENGE:** Create a challenge for classrooms, homerooms, or clubs to decorate tables. A theme such as color, season, or cultures may be used and tables may be displayed throughout the school, such as the front entry, library, hallways or grade level clusters. Tables may even be displayed in public spaces, such as the district office, city hall, the community library, a senior center or local business.

**OUR TABLE IS DIFFERENT:** Many members of the school community do not have traditional families for sharing mealtimes. Make certain to emphasize the importance of connecting through meals with extended family, friends, even sporting teams. The significant message of Eat.Talk.Connect! is connection, whether at home, school, or in greater community.

## **Eat. Talk. Connect! School Newsletter Articles:**

The following articles may be included in school newsletters or duplicated and sent home with students. The newsletter articles were written by Carolyn Barinsky, a member of the Carver County Health Partnership Children's Mental Health Action Team and are used with her permission.

### **Sample #1 Building Connections through Family Meals**

Survival! Many times that is my mode. How do I get through all of the busyness of life? With everything going on, family mealtimes often get shortchanged. Other things and activities compete for family mealtime. Our children are busy with sports, community, church and school activities. The average adult is working more hours than 10 years ago and there are always errands to run, appointments to keep and activities to attend! Who has time for life much less lunch?

Despite our busyness, it is important to make family mealtimes a priority. Why? Because eating meals together is one of the best ways to build family connectedness. New research is demonstrating that connections to family are as critical to mental health as food is to physical health. Our kids need deep connections in order to thrive. It is the sense of connection to family that enables kids to feel secure and to handle the stresses of life. Most important, our children feel loved and part of a family.

Research shows that children who share several meals, at least three meals every week, with their families – without the distraction of TV and other technology– benefit in the following ways:

- They incorporate family values into their lives.
- They have greater academic success – 40-50% of children eating regularly with their families have an A or B average.
- They eat more nutritionally and have fewer problems such as obesity, anorexia or bulimia.
- They experience less stress and are significantly less likely to be depressed.
- They are 40-50% less likely to smoke, use drugs or alcohol, or engage in sexual activity.

It isn't easy! Start simple, but do start. Try 5 meals a week – any day, any meal. Eat out, but do it as a family. Try some of these ideas:

- Get everyone involved. Take turns planning, cooking, and cleaning up. Even the smallest child enjoys the meal more if he gets to help cook or set the table.
- Keep conversations enjoyable. This isn't the time for discipline, lectures or interrogations.
- Take turns leading the discussion. If one person seems to talk all the time, set time limits so everyone gets a turn.
- Make meals fun and special. Have a beach party in front of the fireplace in January.
- Get the TV out of the dining area.
- Have Fun!

Go ahead and try it, just remember to **Eat.Talk.Connect!**

### **Sample #2 Connecting Over Mealtime**

Lately it seems that mealtimes are being sandwiched between the other activities in our lives. It seems that everything is competing for the family mealtime. Our children are busy with community and school activities. The average adult is working more hours than 10 years ago and there are always errands to run, appointments to keep, and activities to attend! Family mealtimes again need to take a priority in our lives, especially for our children. Recent studies show that children who eat at least three meals with their families each week do better in school, experience less stress and depression, have better social skills, are healthier, and are less likely to smoke, use drugs or alcohol, or engage in sexual activity.

When we sit down to eat together, we connect with our children. It is a regular opportunity to communicate values and teach lessons. Most important, our children feel loved and connected as part of a family. It isn't easy! Start simple, but do start. Try 5 meals a week – any day, any meal. Eat out, but do it as a family. Try some of these ideas:

- Get everyone involved. Take turns planning, cooking, and cleaning up. Even the smallest child enjoys the meal more if he gets to help cook or set the table.
- Keep conversations enjoyable. This isn't the time for discipline, lectures or interrogations.
- Take turns leading the discussion. If one person seems to talk all the time, set time limits so everyone gets a turn.
- Make meals fun and special. Have a beach party in front of the fireplace in January.
- Get the TV out of the dining area.
- Have Fun!

Make mealtime one of your family rituals. Rituals help us to cope with losses, grief, and stress. Make mealtime a time to connect with your children!