

# MEAL PLANNING TOOLKIT

*for family chefs*

Simple steps for organizing, planning and getting your kids involved in family meals!

Includes worksheets, menu planners, grocery lists and some quick last minute meals.



REAL FOOD SOLUTIONS



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## WELCOME

Organizing three meals a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year to feed your family is not easy. Our schedules have gotten so busy that "feeding time" can become an inconvenience and a chore. But as a parent, even though it doesn't always seem worthwhile, please make no mistake, as the head chef (and chief bottle washer), your family depends on you for three solid meals a day.

Every carrot you chop, every meal you prepare, every time your family gathers around the table is an opportunity to nourish your children and keep them happy and healthy for a lifetime. The family dinner is also a time to regroup from a busy day and reconnect as a family.

### Is your family in a food rut?

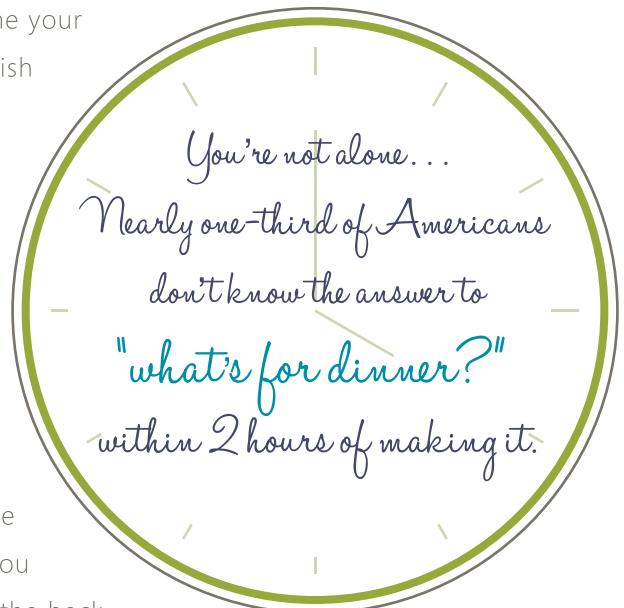
More than half the challenge is simply figuring out what to make, not the lack of options or ingredients. There are more than 300,000 food products in supermarkets across the country, yet many families eat the same foods over and over again. How many times have you stood in front of a packed refrigerator wondering, "What the heck should I make for dinner?" Another cookbook won't solve the problem; you probably have dozens of them collecting dust on your shelf.

A major part of the daily food struggle boils down to "strategic" planning, and as the food manager of your family's meals, you can't fly by the seat of your pants. You need a Weekly Meal Plan.

### A Weekly Menu Plan will:

- pear Take the mystery out of what to eat each day
- pear Save you time
- pear Reduce the last-minute stress of what to make for dinner
- pear Organize and leverage your meals

Once the dilemma of "What's for dinner?" is solved, it's just time to get to work. Creating a healthy meal doesn't need to be complicated. When you diminish the fear of the unknown, you reduce the stress around meals and the chances of whipping up a box of macaroni and cheese or ordering take-out pizza for dinner. Processed food may seem like a good answer in a pinch, but with better planning you can get your family into a healthier routine.



I created this Menu Planning Toolkit to help you take the guesswork out of the daunting task of preparing more than 1,000 meals for your family a year! Making meals is serious business, and serious work, and we parents need all the help we can get.

### You've got to build on:

1. What you and your family like and are comfortable cooking
2. Your weekly schedule and activities

*The kit is organized in 5 steps to help you get organized.*

#### **Step One. Build a Foundation.**

Instead of starting with a blank slate every week, begin by creating an inventory of your meals so you have a quick reference.

#### **Step Two. Organize Your Weekly Meal Plan.**

Create daily themes, like Meatless Mondays or Fish on Fridays, so you're not reinventing the wheel week after week.

#### **Step Three. Cook Once. Eat Twice.**

Efficiency is the key to success. Cook from scratch, but don't start from scratch every night. Master the art of leftovers and work them into your plan.

#### **Step Four. Divide & Conquer: Cooperation and Collaboration in the Kitchen**

Get the whole family involved in the planning and execution of dinner so that the entire burden doesn't just fall on one person (like you!).

#### **Step Five. Reconnect at Dinner.**

Dinner isn't just a meal, it's a time to reconnect, slow down and listen to your kids. Create the right environment to help them wind down and open up after a long day in the trenches.

## 1. STEP ONE. *Build a Foundation: Take Stock of Your Favorite Meals*

Instead of beginning with a blank slate every week, make a list of meals that your family enjoys.

Start by creating a list of your family's current favorite meals, even if it might not be as healthy as you'd prefer. As you improve your planning skills, you can replace unhealthy options with new ideas and ingredients. The key here is to consolidate your "go tos" so you have a quick reference as you create your menu plans and grocery lists.

Take a few minutes to write down your families' top 10 favorite meals in the chart below. This will be the starting point to build from.

Your goal is to continue to add to this list so that you have larger repertoire to draw upon, rather than falling into the common ‘food rut’ and repeatedly eating the same meals. Aim to try one new healthy recipe each week and if everyone likes it, add it to your inventory for next time. If you add one new recipe to your meal plan each week, you’ll learn 52 recipes in a year!



# Family Favorite Meals

## The Kids!

Sit down with your kids and have a conversation about what they like and what they don't, as well as new foods that they're open to trying. Give them an opportunity to voice their opinion and ask them why. Do certain foods (like cookies or sodas) give them stomach aches? Do spicy foods burn their mouth? Are vegetables too crunchy? Help your kids build the connection between what they eat, and how it makes them feel!

Your job is to introduce them to new foods and give them a chance to acquire a taste for foods that they're not (yet) crazy about. Give them some incentives or rewards for trying new foods (See Marble Jar Idea in Section 7).

## 2. STEP TWO. *Organize Your Weekly Meal Plans*

The most important thing you can do to take the stress out of weekly food preparation is to invest some time at the beginning of the week to come up with a plan. Be sure to get your family's input on what they want and how they'd like to contribute. Even if your schedules seem chaotic, you can create a routine to help you make life a bit more predictable.

For example, if you always have fish on Fridays, you're more likely to swing by the fish store, or if one of your kids is always responsible for helping with dinner on Wednesdays, you're more likely to touch base with them in the morning to make sure you have all the ingredients.

One way to organize your week is to assign a theme each day.

*Here are some ideas:*

**Slow Cooker Night.** This is perfect for nights when you know you'll be home late and dinner needs to be on the table ASAP! If you double the recipe, you can also plan on leftovers for another night. (See next section for specific leftover ideas.)

**Pizza Night.** If the kids like pizza, make Friday homemade pizza nights. Be sure to get the kids involved in making the dough, grating the cheese, or cutting up the vegetables. Create individual pizzas so everyone can pick their favorite toppings. Use quality ingredients and lots of vegetables for a healthy homemade pizza. You can purchase frozen dough, or make your own and freeze it.

**Kid's Choice Night.** Designate someone to be in charge of dinner 1-2 nights a week. Ask them to pick the meal, prepare the grocery list, and assist with the prep and cooking. Kids who are old enough can even cook the meal, independently or with help. It's important to get everyone involved! Having an opportunity to take charge of the meal will give them ownership and remind them that they are part of the team! (see Step 7 for more on this!)

**What themes would work for your family?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

### 3. STEP THREE. Cook Once. Eat Twice

Save time and money by "reusing" last night's leftovers. Weaving this in to your menu plan will save you oodles of time and stress throughout the week.

And leftovers doesn't just mean eating the exact same meal more than once. Leftover sides or other meal parts can be great new meal starters!

*Here are some ideas:*

- ◆ Cook a larger roast (such as pork roast or beef pot roast), and use leftovers for tacos or burritos.
- ◆ Roast extra vegetables and eat them for breakfast the next day or toss them on a salad for dinner the next night.
- ◆ Bake a chicken and save leftover meat for a chicken salad for lunch.
- ◆ Save leftover cooked or raw veggies to throw on top of your salads or in a stir fry during the week.
- ◆ Freeze your leftovers. Even if you have only 1 or 2 servings left, these might come in handy on a night when you need something fast. Leftovers can be packed in freezer bags or glass containers. Avoid freezing or reheating food in plastic containers.
- ◆ Mashed potatoes make great hash browns, pancakes or the topping for a homemade Shepherd's Pie.
- ◆ Leftover beans are great for homemade bean dips or in salads.
- ◆ Save leftover ham, turkey, chicken or beef bones for homemade stocks for soups and to flavor other dishes. If you're not ready to make the stock, just toss them in the freezer.

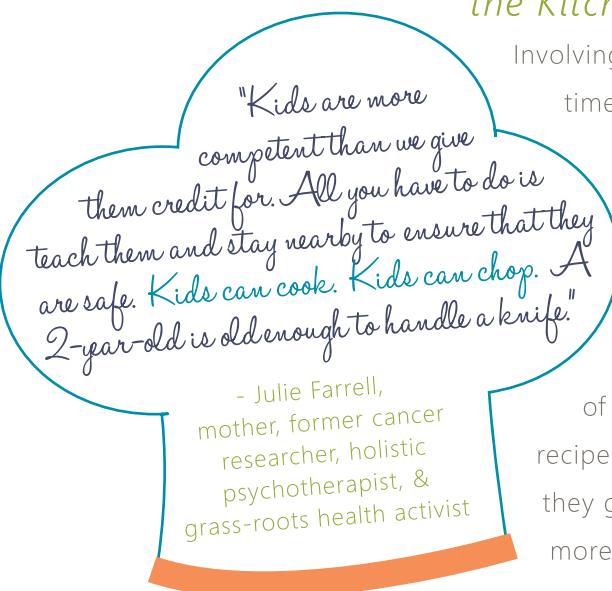
*Three ideas for leftovers:*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

#### *Mom's Tip!*

*When her two young girls were growing up, Joanne planned for three meals a week. With those three meals as a base, she would eat leftovers one night, and make a pantry meal the other night.*

## 4. STEP FOUR. *Divide & Conquer: Cooperation and Collaboration in the Kitchen*



Involving the whole family in the kitchen provides high-quality "slow" time and an opportunity for parents and kids to work together.

Making dinner as a team can be a great way to unwind, relax, and create!

Kids can help in the kitchen, and the more involved they are in the process, the more they'll appreciate what it takes to prepare a meal. It's also essential for kids to learn the basics of cooking like chopping vegetables, taste testing and following a recipe. This will help them develop skills and confidence so that when they grow older and need to cook for themselves they will know more than how to make a pot of Ramen! (see Section 7 for more!)

*Here's how to incorporate teamwork into your meal preparation:*

- ◆ Planning the meal: Get everyone involved in the meal planning process.
- ◆ Shopping and unloading groceries. Take your kids shopping and ask them to help you read labels and help you decide what food is the healthiest.
- ◆ Cooking the meal: Kids can learn how to make simple meals, and they can help mom and dad in the kitchen.
- ◆ Setting the table: Take the time to set a nice table. This is a perfect job for kids. You can also ask them to make a nice centerpiece or decorate placemats.
- ◆ Clearing the table: Everyone can help clear the table and stack the dishes on the counter. Many hands make light work!
- ◆ Help with the dishes: Set up an assembly line and ask one person to clear, another to rinse, and another to load items in the dishwasher.
- ◆ Pack up leftovers: Packing up leftovers is an easy job that is great for young kids.

*What chores can your kids help with in the kitchen?*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_

## 5. STEP FIVE. *Dinner Rituals: How to Reconnect at Dinner*

Healthy food is fundamental, but in today's world, when busy lives pull everyone in different directions, making dinner meaningful is also an important way to reconnect as a family and give your kids (and mom and dad) downtime. Creating rituals will make dinnertime something your kids look forward to and something they will remember.

As the head chef, you set the pace so create some boundaries around dinnertime and try to take the pace down a notch. Ask the kids to turn off the technology for a few minutes to help in the kitchen and relax for dinnertime.

### *Ideas for making dinner more special*

- Slow down and be thankful for your food. Join hands and ask everyone to say "thanks" or find a poem or prayer that everyone can say together.
- Be mindful of the day and be thankful for the food you are about to eat, no matter what it is. Tell kids no "yucky" at the table.
- Ask kids to decorate the table with fresh flowers (or leaves) from the garden or made from construction paper. Or ask them to pull out some photographs that you could all look at over dinner.
- Use your "best" china once in awhile and cloth napkins instead of paper.
- Light a candle—or a whole bunch of candles—and enjoy a candlelit dinner.
- Talk about "apples, oranges, and lemons."
  - Apple: What was the best part of your day?
  - Orange: What are you looking forward to tomorrow?
  - Lemon: What went wrong in your day?
- Problem solving: Use dinnertime as an opportunity to help solve challenges and help kids turn obstacles into opportunities!
- Encourage the chewing game! Chewing food well is critical for good digestion and absorption of nutrients. Ask kids to chew their food 30 times to see if they can make soup in their mouth before they swallow!
- Practice table manners and teach kids social graces like sitting up straight, putting their napkin on their lap and not chewing with their mouth open. Acknowledge positive actions instead of always reminding kids what they are doing wrong at the dinner table.

*"The important thing is that you sit down with your kids and share food."*

*-Kathy Gunst, food writer, chef  
& resident chef of WBUR's  
Here & Now on NPR*

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## *Homework:*

Do you find your family dining and dashing? What's keeping your family from dinner time? What are three things you can do to slow down mealtime and have a meaningful discussion? Ask your kids to pick their favorite idea from above and integrate it into our menu plans. Give kids incentives and rewards and make sure to follow through.

**What are your biggest challenges in bringing everyone together for dinner?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**What are three things we can do to slow down and reconnect at dinnertime:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## 6. TIPS FOR ENSURING HEALTHY MEALS

**Focus on Whole Foods.** Choose real foods that are as close to their natural state as possible.

Whole foods that are still intact have everything that your body needs to digest and absorb nutrients. Whole foods also contain fiber which helps sustain energy and reduce cravings.

**Choose Organic Foods When Possible.** Studies show that organic foods are up to 30 percent more nutritious and they don't contain pesticides and other chemicals that can overload a body with too much junk! Reducing the amount of pesticides your children eat will decrease their toxic load so they can keep their immune system strong.

**Buy Local.** Look for local foods from your nearby farmers. Farm fresh foods are probably fresher and will taste better because they don't have to be picked unripe. Buying from farmers directly through CSAs (community supported agriculture), farmers markets or at your local grocers will also support your local economy.

**Avoid highly processed foods with ingredients such as:**

- ◆ Partially hydrogenated fats (trans fats), increase risk of heart disease. Read labels and avoid deep-fried fast foods, french fries, and margarines and shortenings, which are in foods like crackers, snack foods, cookies and other baked foods.
- ◆ White refined flour, which has lost most of its nutrients and quickly turns into glucose in your system (just as quickly as sugar does).
- ◆ High fructose corn syrup.

**Avoid canned foods with BPA.** Bisphenol A (BPA) is a synthetic estrogen that can disrupt the endocrine system and has been linked to cancer, obesity, diabetes, and early puberty. BPA is found in food and drink containers and epoxy resins used to coat the lining of cans. The problem is that it can leak into foods and beverages.

**Create a colorful plate with vegetables!** The more colorful your plate, the greater the range of vitamins, phyto nutrients, and minerals you'll get. Make sure to feature at least 3 to 4 colors each meal like orange, red, and green!

**Avoid juice, soda, and other high-sugar drinks with artificial ingredients.**

These drinks are full of empty calories and weaken your immune system. They can also put your children at risk for type 2 diabetes.

**mom's  
advice:**

"I didn't borrow how my mother cooked everything, but I think that the food needs to be real. My mother aspired for food to be pretty. If you have lots of different vegetables, you'll have lots of different vitamins. 'Something yellow, something green, and something orange—do I have all my nutrients covered here?' I think about that." - Mimi White, mother, poet, writer, teacher, and clean-energy advocate.

## 7. TEACH YOUR KIDS TO COOK!

If you don't teach your kids how to cook, then who will? One of the most important things you can do to get your kids to appreciate mealtime is to get them involved in the festivities. Invite your kids to help with meal preparation and let them know you have expectations. There is nothing more pleasing to a child then creating something for the family that everyone likes and appreciates.

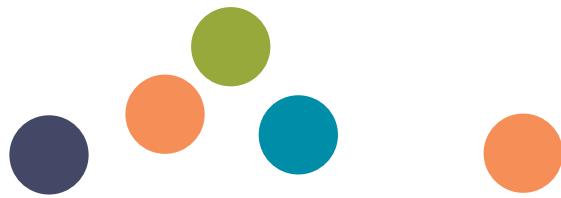
*There are many ways to educate and inspire your children in the kitchen.*

- pear Build their confidence. At a very young age, your kids can help in the kitchen, the more comfortable they feel hanging with mom and dad in the kitchen, the more apt they will be to be involved.
- pear Teach your kids how to safely prepare food. Get them comfortable near a hot oven or stove, and teach them to cut with a knife. There are "starter" knives available for toddlers, so you can start this young.
- pear Teach them how to cook an egg. Fried, poach, boiled and scrambled. This skill will ensure that they never go hungry if they're cooking at home.
- pear Teach them terminology. Sautee, sear, chop, blanch, steam, boil. Make sure they know how to use measuring tools like measuring spoons and how to use a can opener.
- pear Teach them how to read a recipe. Get them comfortable making something from scratch. Put them in charge of dinner one night, and ask them to invite a friend over to help the cook.
- pear Let them make a mess! Let your kids experiment..if that means making a mess, that's okay. Messes are "cleanupable." Memories are for a lifetime.



### *Incentive Idea: Marble Reward Jar*

It's fun to give kids incentives to try new foods or help out in the kitchen. Rather than rewarding the child with a treat each time, which can lead to unhealthy eating habits, try a Marble Reward Jar. Keep the Jar on display in the kitchen, and each time your child samples a new food or completes a helpful mealtime task, he or she can add a marble to the jar. When the marble jar fills up, reward him or her with a special treat, like a trip to the zoo or their favorite homemade cookies!



## 8. LAST-MINUTE MEALS

**A Healthier Pizza Choice.** Stock up on a good quality, frozen organic whole grain pizza dough and add your own toppings, such as caramelized onions, red peppers, spinach, or olives. Definitely healthier than Dominos!

**Mexican Pizza.** Keep frozen whole grain rice or corn tortillas on hand. Melt cheese on top with black beans, brown rice, corn, tomatoes, and your other favorite toppings. Serve with salsa or guacamole.

**Stir Fry.** Clean out your fridge and use up all the leftover veggies. Sauté leftover brown rice in sesame oil and add whatever veggies you have (always keep frozen veggies in stock). Add soy sauce (gluten free, low sodium). Cut a hole in the stir fry, and scramble an egg. Sprinkle nuts like cashews or almonds on top.

**Breakfast for Dinner.** Fry an egg or make an omelet with lots of veggies. Or try a frittata. Serve with a fresh green salad.

**Pasta.** Sauté garlic in olive oil and toss it over whole grain or wheat-free pasta with some parmesan cheese. Add some broccoli, spinach, or peas. And for some protein, add some tuna or frozen shrimp.

**Fish Burgers.** Pulse one can of wild Alaskan salmon with an egg, minced onion, chopped celery, and herbs in Cuisinart. Form patties, and sauté in olive oil/and or butter. Or better yet - pick up some fresh fish for your burger. Use breadcrumbs to bind, if needed.

**Other healthy quick-meal ideas:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_



# Weekly Family Meal Planner

MEAL	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
BREAKFAST							
LUNCH							
DINNER							
SNACKS							
PREP							
GROCERIES							

## 10. GROCERY LISTS



# Grocery List

FRESH FRUITS	MEATS
	FROZEN FOODS
FRESH VEGETABLES	
	PACKAGED OR CANNED
100% WHOLE GRAINS & BEANS	
	CONDIMENTS/SPICES/VINEGAR/OIL
DAIRY SECTION (INCLUDING EGGS)	SNACKS
NUTS/NUT BUTTERS	MISC.

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