Family meals have been found to be associated with improved vocabulary and language skills, social skills, manners, academic skills in children of all ages, and less risk-taking behavior (such as drug abuse and suicidality) in adolescents. Sitting around the kitchen table together – or even a restaurant table or a picnic table on occasion – brings in a number of values and protective factors for kids. It demonstrates that there is a value placed on having the family come together and that there are rules and routines for doing so. Some one has taken the time to buy food and plan and prepare a meal; someone has set the table and will clear the dishes. At the table, standards are enforced and conversation encouraged. For those few moments of the day, parents are actually monitoring their children’s behavior, vocabulary, and progress in school – whether they realize it or not. Children are learning expected standards. They have their parents’ attention.

Try to make mealtime a TV – free zone, because 40% of families say they always or often watch TV during meals. Research shows the presence of television during meals negates some of the nutrition benefits of family meals, and undermines the social interaction of the experience as well.

Are there common struggles about what the children eat? Follow the teachings of dietician and social worker Ellyn Satter, author of “How to Get Your Child to Eat, but Not Too Much” (Bull Publishing: 1987), who delineates parents’ responsibilities with regard to food as “what, when, and where,” while leaving to the children “how much” and “whether.” Parents control the grocery cart, snack choices (and the snack schedule), and the food offerings on the plate, but once the food is offered, they should back off.

Even very young children, given a healthy array of options, will choose the appropriate balance of health foods over a period of months.

The family with a picky eater needs to be relieved of the “short order cook syndrome,” by ensuring that every meal contains a least one food the child is pretty certain to eat. No food is then offered other than what is on the plate, and if the child leaves the table hungry, no food should be offered for a least an hour (and should preferably then include the same food served at dinner, reheated and attractively re-served).
Children begin to eat a wider variety of foods when they are required to tolerate having a sample of each meal item on their plates, and if they see others at the table eating all of the food choices served at a meal.

Children who misbehave at the table (if the behavior is not age appropriate, ask for details!) should be dismissed from the table that meal, and their chair removed. Very small children may have allowable activities at the table once they have finished eating.

Older children who want to eat and bolt, need to know that there is a set amount of time required for dinner and conversation (enforced with a timer, if necessary), and that they will not be excused unless that time has lapsed. Leave dissension for some other time, preserving mealtime for real conversation. Berating family members and arguing at the table are potential paths to eating disturbances.

To get a sense of just how important family meals are, check out the Web site for the Promoting Family Meals Project at the Center for Families at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind. (www.cfs.purdue.edu/CFF/promotingfamilymeals). Click “links” on the home page to get more information.

Excerpted from: Dr Howard, assistant professor of pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, and co-director of the Center for Promotion of Child Development Through Primary Care (www.CHADIS.org).