Having meals together as a family offers so much more than just an opportunity to eat. Family meals provide an opportunity to strengthen family bonds, teach children invaluable life lessons, instill healthful eating habits, while helping to make memories that will last a lifetime.

However, it is no easy feat having regular family meals. It takes time and dedication.

Explore the following strategies to help streamline your planning, shopping and preparation process, so you can spend time enjoying the meal or doing other fun things together as a family.

You will find with experience that the more you plan and the more family members that are involved in the process, the quicker you can prepare meals that your entire family can enjoy together.

Plan, shop, cook, eat and clean together.

Make mealtime a family time.

Check out the Nutrition Education for Wellness (NEW) program’s collection of resources, which include more handy tips for meal planning in addition to local recipes that you can experiment with your families at home:

www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/new/resources.htm

Plan, shop, cook, eat and clean together.

Hawaii Child Care Nutrition Program

Nutrition Education for Wellness Program

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MANOA COLLEGE OF TROPICAL AGRICULTURE AND HUMAN RESOURCES 1555 EAST-WEST ROAD, AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES 300, HONOLULU, HAWAII 96822. The UH-CTAH Cooperative Extension Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperate in presenting to the people of Hawaii programs and services without regard to race, sex, age, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, disability, marital status, arrest and court record, sexual orientation, or veteran status. The University is an equal opportunity affirmative action institution.
• Review recipe ingredients & directions ahead of time, then plan accordingly. For example, meats may need to be marinated in the fridge ahead of time.

• Transfer frozen foods from the freezer to the refrigerator in a tray or pan beforehand to help it defrost safely in a timely manner.

• Be flexible with your meals—use ingredients you have at home. For instance, if you run out of fresh salad ingredients, heat up frozen vegetables instead.

• Involve every family member. Have children contribute menu choices, such as picking a fruit or vegetable to enjoy at the next meal.

• Include favorite fruits & veggies (frozen, canned, dried, fresh) with any meal.

• Help kids learn to appreciate new foods. Introduce new foods alongside familiar, well-liked foods. The more foods they like, the easier planning meals will become.

• Include a variety of foods.

• Plan for occasional one-pot meals that require less clean up.

• Plan to make double a recipe for multiple meals.

• Plan for occasional easy-fix breakfast meals for dinner.

• Consider slow-cooker meals that require less attention.

• For days when there is no time to plan or prepare a meal, heat up frozen leftover meals or have a family dinner out at a restaurant.

SHOP...

• Prepare a shopping list & stick to it.

• At the store, teach children about the foods you are buying.

• Be flexible - buy alternative ingredients, like pork instead of beef, when needed.

• Shop for produce in season. Produce will often taste better & be cheaper.

COOK...

• Work as a team to speed the cooking process, while strengthening family bonds.

• Everyone must wash their hands with soap & water before preparing food.

• Kids like trying foods they helped to prepare. Give them simple age-appropriate tasks, like setting the table or rinsing vegetables. Always supervise, be patient, praise & thank them for helping.

• Use microwaves for convenient defrosting & reheating foods, like leftovers or vegetables.

• Prepare extra ingredients that you can refrigerate & quickly add to your next meal. For instance, chop extra onions, refrigerate & add to tomorrow’s stew.

• Make extra of your main dish. Freeze & enjoy at a later meal.

• Offer everyone the same foods. Do not short-order-cook.

EAT...

• Limit distractions. Turn off electronics, such as TVs.

• Teach and model respectful table manners. Say ‘thank you’ & ‘please.’

• Share food & stories.

• Listen and talk respectfully to each other. Do not fight.

• Children learn from watching you. Eat fruits & veggies, and your children will too.

• Parents provide, kids decide. Encourage, but let them decide what & how much to eat.

• When children are ready, have them serve themselves. Teach them to take smaller amounts first, then to get more if they are still hungry.

• Take your time & enjoy the meal: food & company.

CLEAN...

• Promptly refrigerate leftovers.

• Work as a team. While one washes dishes, one can sweep, put away food or start planning for the next family meal.

Which strategies will you consider doing with your family?

Responsibilities related to work, school & extracurricular activities may often pull family members in different directions, making it a constant challenge to have family meals together.

However, when life gets hectic — pause a moment — and remember the fond memories you created with your family at past mealtimes. Then consider how many more fun & meaningful moments you can share together as a family at upcoming meals, & how invaluable such memories will be to your loved ones.

Plan, shop, cook, eat & clean together. Make mealtime a family time.