

YES, BUT....

THE 10 MOST COMMON EXCUSES FOR NOT COOKING

Parents, you cannot use your many excuses for not having family dinnertime. I call these the "Yes, buts." You know how great it would be to cook for your family and sit down to dinner together at home . . . But . . . and then come all the excuses. Let's talk about those excuses. Let's talk about the many distractions of real life today. Let's take away all the excuses.

1. I don't know how to cook; I'm not good at it.

Nowadays there are so many ways to learn how to cook. There's always trial and error, but you can reduce the errors significantly by learning a few cooking essentials through cookbooks like this one, videos on Internet websites, and the Food Network on TV. All it takes is desire and the belief that you can cook as well as many of the folks whose food you've been relying on until now.

Does your family eat a lot of hamburgers and frozen dinners? Do they eat mediocre fare at the all-you-can-eat buffet where the food is cheap but the beverage costs add up to a car payment? Trust me, your chicken dinner, home-made biscuits, and a salad you toss yourself will taste better and be better for you than what you can buy at those mediocre fast-casual delis and restaurants. Besides, you'll be filling your home with the irresistible aromas of home cooking and putting the focus on your family rather than on the restaurant.

2. I just don't feel like cooking or eating tonight.

If you don't, who will? This is what you will face:

*I don't know
how to cook...*



"I wonder what we can eat for dinner tonight?" asks a starving 12-year-old as the hunger pangs start to burn.

"What's for dinner?" another child yells out from the TV room. Nobody has a clue.

"Cereal," Mom yells from a nearby room. *"Leftover pot roast from three days ago. Microwave a hot dog."*

"Do we have any buns?" someone yells.

"No, but we have plenty of ketchup and mustard."

"Microwave one of those frozen pizzas," Mom yells.

"Dad, aren't you hungry?"

"No, not really; I had a big lunch out today. I'm still full.

Maybe later I'll have a piece of toast or a bowl of cereal."

"Mom, do you want me to throw in a pizza for you?"

"No, thanks, I'm not eating tonight."

What are we teaching our children through this "conversation"? How can we ask them to do well in school if we can't give them proper nutrition? How can we not care enough to have dinner for our family?

3. I'm on a diet and can't be in the kitchen.

Some mothers seem overly concerned about gaining weight if they cook. Food must be out of sight, out of mind. If this is you, you have decided to let your family fend for themselves. But you need to decide instead that your family comes first in your life, not your "diet."

The key to healthful eating is not dieting or fat content or calorie or carb counts. It's been proven over and over that diets don't work long-term. Healthful eating is about eating a variety of freshly prepared foods and paying attention to portion size. A piece of meat the size of your palm is one portion. A serving of vegetables, potatoes, rice, or pasta the size of your fist is one portion. You can cook any nutritious meal and eat one portion of it.

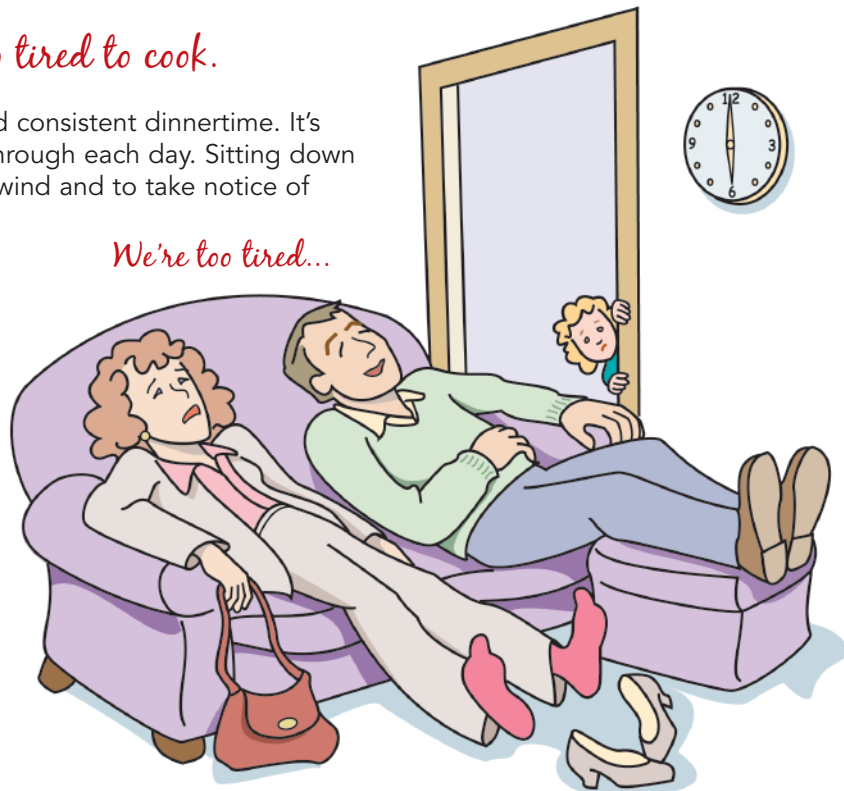
My cry to any mother who wants to keep her feminine form: Don't be afraid to eat! Your job is to teach good nutrition to your family. You cannot teach them to be afraid of eating. For too many girls, putting food into their mouths involves great pain and anxiety, which can lead to eating disorders.

Enjoy sitting down and eating, not until you are full, but until you are satisfied. There lies the difference. Don't think only of yourself when it comes to dinner-time. Your family deserves a well-balanced diet and all the benefits that come from sitting down together for a home-cooked meal.

4. We both work and get home too tired to cook.

Children whose parents are gone all day need consistent dinnertime. It's the bonding as a family that will carry them through each day. Sitting down together at dinner gives everyone time to unwind and to take notice of one another. Mom and Dad have a chance to give a nod of appreciation to each other. My plan will help you do this no matter what your situation.

Theme nights make meal planning easier. And this cookbook is full of great recipes that you will be excited about cooking and your family will be excited about eating. If you plan menus a week or two in advance, you can have most of the stress out of the way. Come home and unwind in the kitchen with the kids or your partner helping you. Share in the cooking. One can do the chopping and one do the assembly. If your kids are old enough, give them assignments for after-school so you don't always have the sole responsibility.



5. We get home too late to cook.

Little ones cannot wait much past 7 p.m. to eat, and they need to be in bed by 8:00. So hopefully your late work schedule will not have to last forever! School-age children can make a sandwich to tide them over to a late mealtime. As long as they know dinner is coming before they go to bed, they will be fine. They will look forward to it.

Your children can help. Preteens can help in many of the preparations that do not involve the cooktop, such as putting potatoes in the oven to bake, taking something from the fridge directly to the oven, making lemonade, mixing cookie batter, setting the table. Teenagers can definitely be trusted with the burners. If the recipe is laid out and the ingredients are in plain sight, anyone can cook, boys and girls alike. All they have to do is follow the directions.

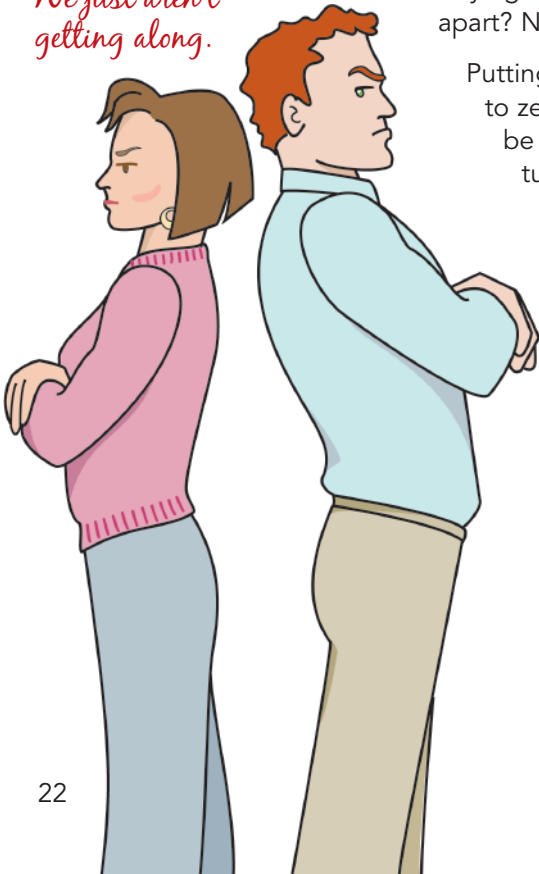
Many dishes can be put together ahead of time. Get the whole family together on Saturdays or Sundays to put together dishes for the week, or assemble them the night before, or in the morning before heading to work, or just do any chopping or pre-prep and finish them when you get home. Some of my recipes are prepared in the slow cooker that can go all day long. Others are quick to make, and dinner can be prepared start to finish in a short time.

6. My spouse and I just aren't getting along.

You may feel that your own problems are bigger and more important than worrying about getting dinner on the table. So do you let the family fall apart? No. Why make the kids suffer? How about putting the kids first?

Putting dinner on the table will give your mind something positive to zero in on. With my meal plan, dinner will be something you will be proud of at the end of the day, even though your life seems in turmoil. Your spouse may actually come to the table in a better mood. We all love a hot meal. Both of you may decide to be home on time to participate in the family dinner hour. This could be a healing power in your relationship. You both need that interaction with the kids. Bring everyone back to the table and begin again, work out your misunderstandings, and start fresh.

We just aren't getting along.



7. Everyone is going in different directions.

Jobs, extra-curricular activities, the gym—all of these can keep family members away from home at the dinner hour. But if you can get even half of the family home for dinner, you can set the other meals in the fridge (with a plate all ready to heat in the microwave) for when the absentees get home. They'll be famished so they'll be glad to know dinner is waiting for them.

I can remember many, many nights of teenage kids coming in late and popping their plate in the microwave. Oh, how their eyes lit up to see wonderful hot food for them! Nothing fancy has to be waiting for them. Something hot and easy will be the best every time. I visited with my kids as they ate, as did other family members who were still up. The energy from those who had been home for dinner was great, because those who came in late could still benefit from it.

8. Everybody wants something different to eat.

Some families have gotten into the habit of everyone eating their own thing. No wonder mealtime means stress. It's time to change that habit and have everyone sit down to the same meal. Besides easing your workload and giving everyone a chance to bond over dinner, this provides other benefits. Think about this:

When the parent becomes a "short-order cook" to please everyone, and children are allowed to eat their favorite food every night, children eat more. But when children eat a family meal, they learn to enjoy a greater variety of foods. Some of these are not their favorites, so they eat smaller portions. Start serving everyone the same meal together and make this the new pattern in your family. You and your family can decide together on the theme nights you want to have so that everyone regularly gets his or her "favorites."

*Everybody
wants something
different...*



9. *The kids ate big snacks and are not hungry.*

Children who are famished right after school can have a snack, but when they know that a great dinner is coming soon, they are satisfied with less at snack time. They will want to save their appetite.

Offer just enough of a snack to take the edge off before dinner. Have a piece of fruit or cheese and crackers. On cold days serve a cup of hot chocolate. Make popcorn and serve with a soda. Make cookies one weekend, freeze them, and take out just enough each day for a snack. This is one reason I wasn't big on dessert most nights of the week. If the kids and I had had a cookie for a before-dinner snack, we didn't need sweets after dinner too. More snack ideas are on page 271.

Limiting snacks and keeping to a consistent dinnertime ensures proper eating habits and helps us as parents see what our children are eating. We can get control of obesity or eating disorders before they get out of hand.

10. *There is nothing to eat in the house.*

This is where meal planning comes in. If you keep your pantry stocked with the basics, plan a week's worth of menus at once, and buy all the groceries you will need for those meals, you will always have on hand everything you need to make dinner. And my theme nights and the recipes in this book make it easy to plan a week's worth of menus in 10 minutes. Simply go to the chapter for each night of the week and make your selection. No more wondering what to have for dinner. Problem solved.

The kids ate big snacks and aren't hungry...



*Enough excuses!
Let's get started!*