

# Family Meals: Cooking, Connection, and Culture

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Michael and Susan Dell  
Center for Healthy Living

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# HOW GOOD FOOD WORKS

We teach people how to **grow**, **prepare**, and **share** food that encourages lifelong health and well-being through hands-on evidenced-based classes taught across our garden, kitchen, clinic, and community.

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We advance health and healthy living for children and families through cutting-edge research, innovative community-based programs, and dissemination of evidence-based practices.

### STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS



# Questions?

**Please post your questions in  
the chat for the audience Q&A  
session**

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# Objectives:

- Illustrate how regular family meals contribute to improved social interactions and emotional health by fostering a supportive environment and utilizing effective communication strategies.
- Discuss how family meals can establish a healthier food environment, encouraging balanced eating habits and the development of nutritious eaters through evidence-based practices.
- Provide practical methods for using family meals to promote mindful eating and improve communication, emphasizing the importance of regular evaluation and adaptation of these practices to meet family needs.

# The importance of shared mealtimes:

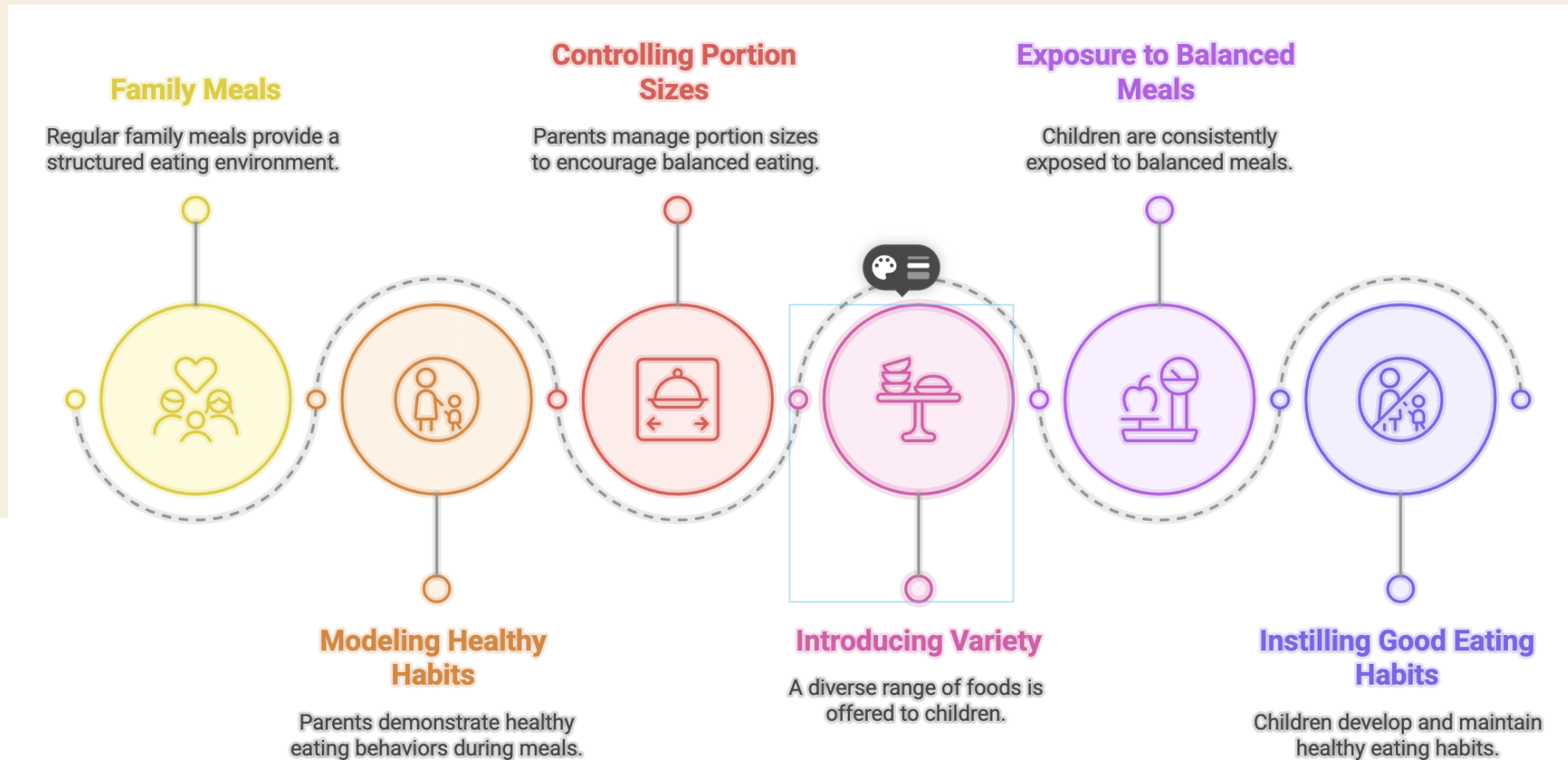
Association with numerous positive health and psychosocial outcomes for both children and parents.

Frequent family meals are linked to:

- Better nutritional health in children and adolescents
- Healthier dietary patterns
- Reduced risk of obesity
- Lower likelihood of disordered eating



# Promote Healthy Eating Habits:



(Hammons & Fiese, 2011)



# Shared Family Meals and Mental Well Being:

- Lower levels of depressive symptoms
- Lower levels of Stress
- Lower emotional problems
- Higher levels of self-esteem and overall well-being.

(Utter et al., 2019)  
(Berge et al., 2023)



# Family Meals and Adolescent Health:

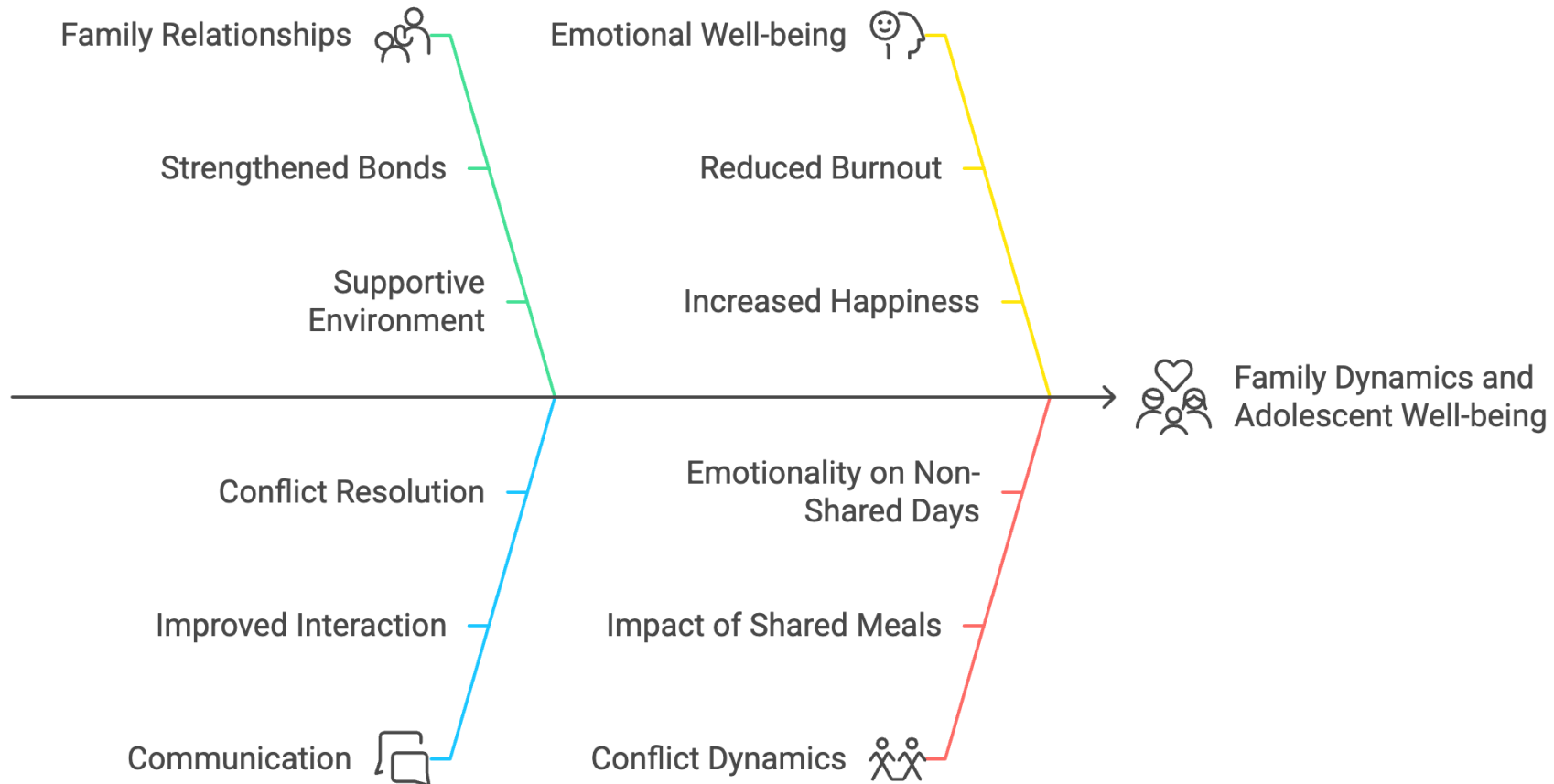
- Frequent family meals are correlated with fewer risk-taking behaviors such as substance use and violent behavior
- Better academic performance
- Lower rates of behavioral problems
- Improved interpersonal dynamics during meals, also plays a significant role in these positive outcomes

(Harrison et al., 2015), (Utter et al., 2013), (White et al., 2018)



# Strengthening Family Bonds

## Enhancing Family Dynamics through Shared Meals



(Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2020)

(Berge et al., 2014)

## **Improved Communication through family meals sharing:**

Regular family meals encourage open dialogue.

This is especially important for children, as it gives them a safe space to express themselves, share concerns, and develop confidence in their communication skills.

For adults, it can offer a break from the challenges of life and a chance to unwind

# Creating Traditions and Rituals:

- Family meals provide a chance to establish traditions, whether it's a weekly dinner, holiday gatherings, or simply making a meal together on Sundays.
- These rituals create a sense of continuity and stability in a family, offering something familiar and meaningful that everyone can look forward to
  - Light a candle or dim the lights
  - Play a bell or chime sound
  - Select "dinner music"



## Develop Life Skills:

- Meal preparation and planning involve several important life skills:
  - Time management
  - Math for Measurements and Reading Comprehension
  - Budgeting
  - Grocery shopping
  - Creativity
- Including children or teenagers in meal prep teaches them not only how to cook but also about nutrition, teamwork, and responsibility.
- It also creates opportunities to bond over shared tasks and achieve something together

(Soldavini et al., 2021)



# Encourage Mindful Eating



Eating together allows people to slow down and focus on the food and the company rather than rushing through a meal.



It encourages mindfulness, helping individuals be more in tune with their hunger cues and the enjoyment of eating. This can reduce overeating or unhealthy eating habits.

# Creating a Routine:

With modern, busy schedules, it can be easy for families to skip meals together.

Having regular family meals sets a structure and routine that can provide comfort, stability, and predictability.

This routine can be grounding, especially for children.



# Reducing Technology Distractions:



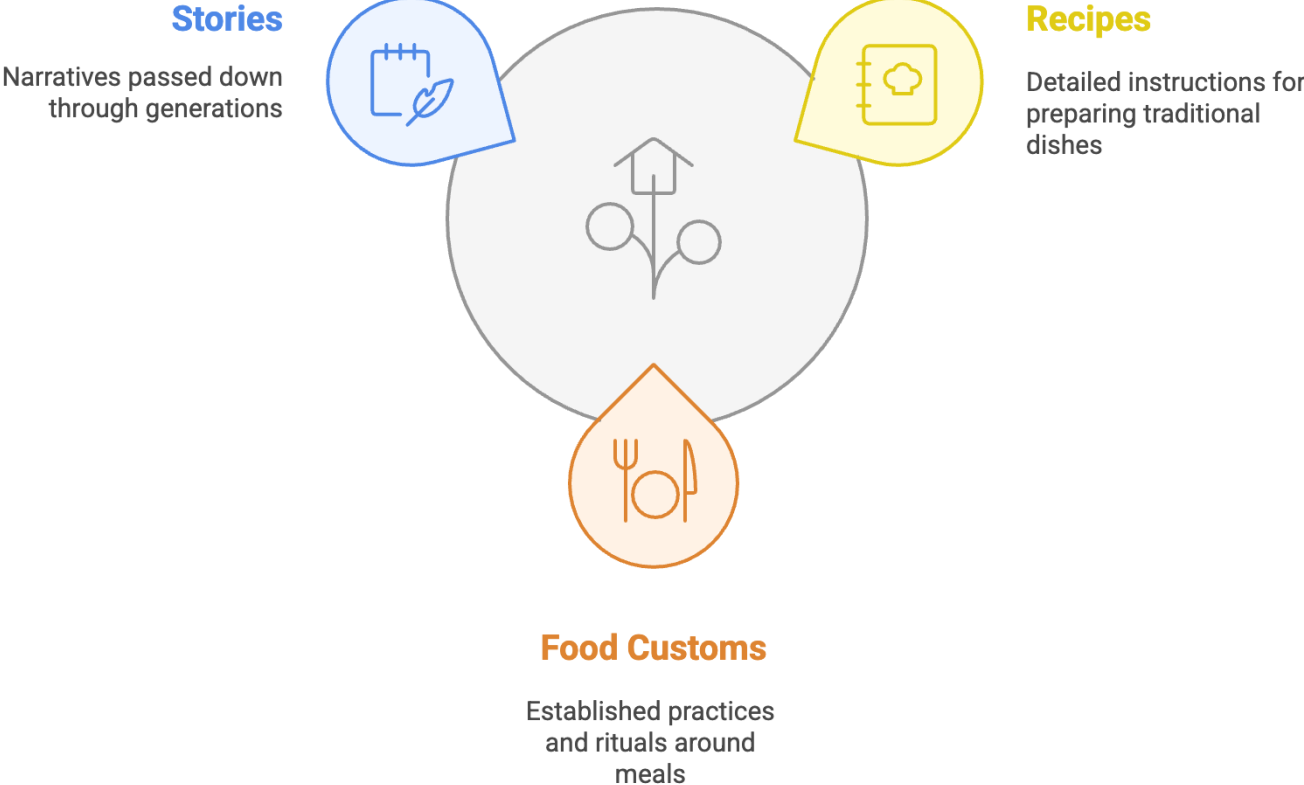
Family meals can provide a break from screens—television, smartphones, tablets—giving family members a chance to be present with each other without digital distractions.



This allows for more authentic connections and fosters the habit of engaging in face-to-face communication.

# Building Family Heritage:

## Elements Preserving Heritage and Identity



# Cooking and Culture

- Draw on cultural or family traditions for inspiration
  - Are there cultural or traditional foods that you want your children to learn about or that evoke positive memories with loved ones?
  - Think about traditions surrounding foods including gratitude or religious beliefs
  - You can start your own tradition based on your values, preferences & availability



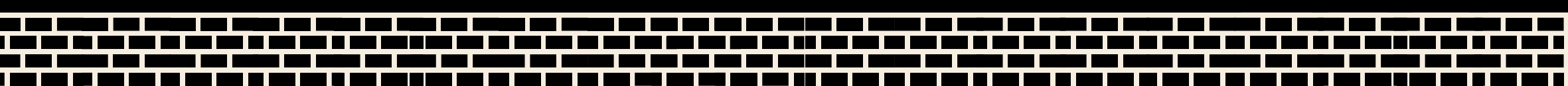
# Examining Cultural Beliefs

- Certain cultural foods may be perceived as "healthy" or "unhealthy"
- Studies have shown that as immigrants to the U.S. become "acculturated" their diet quality may decline
  - Increase in saturated fat, sugar and salt (Batis et al., 2011)
  - Increase in consumption of ultra-processed foods (Pachipala et al., 2022)
- Consider looking through the lens of whole foods v. processed foods
- Consider portion sizes and variety of foods



# Overcoming barriers

- People want to share traditions but may note lack of time, availability of certain foods or children's desire for "fast foods" (Trofholz et al, 2018)
- Getting started (Satter, E. 2025)



Focus on the habit of a family meals before focusing on the food itself

Pair familiar with unfamiliar food

Pair preferred with less-preferred food

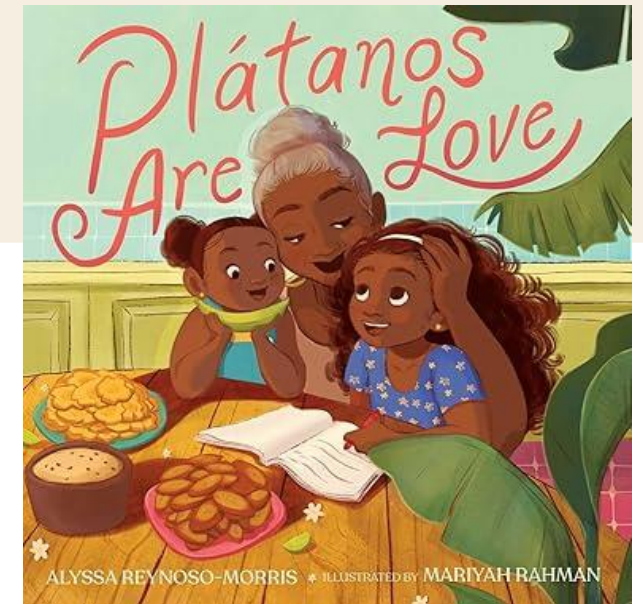
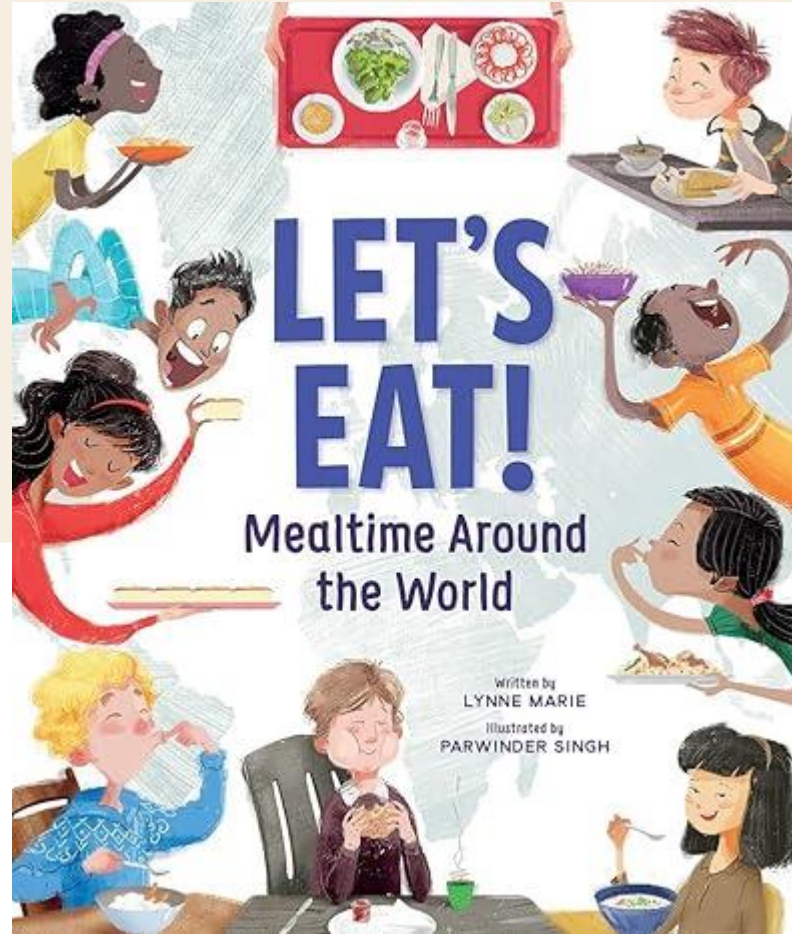
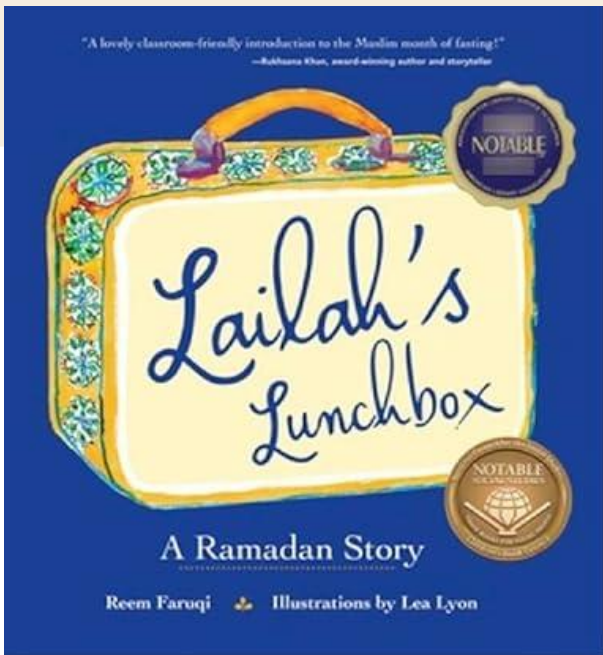
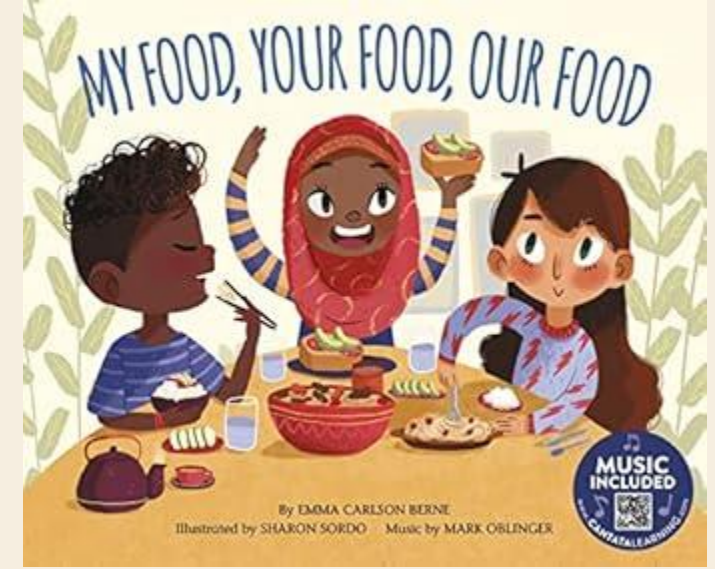
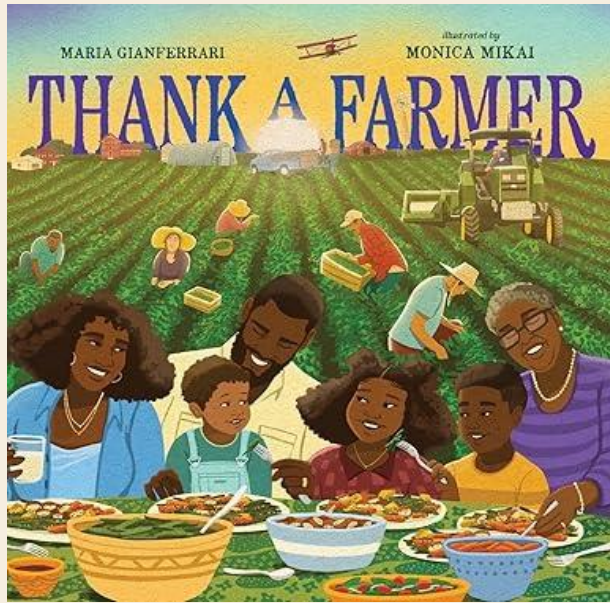
Keep pressure low – let kids explore food, look, smell, touch, reject, repeat

# Start Small:

- Is there one part of a traditional meal you can make?
- Can you involve family members to increase interest and decrease the amount of work?
- Plan for a weekend or breakfast meal



# Read to Reinforce



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# Shared Family Meals Summary:

- In summary, **shared family meals** are crucial for promoting better nutritional, mental, and psychosocial health outcomes in children, adolescents, and parents, highlighting the importance of encouraging regular family mealtimes.
- Create a foundation for healthy, balanced living.
- Whether it's a simple dinner or a more elaborate weekend gathering, the act of sitting down together is an invaluable practice in any house





# Lets' Cook!

- *Homemade Chicken Nuggets*
- *Broccoli Tots*



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