

## Simplify Meal Time

Meal Time can be one of the most stressful chores of the day. Here are some tips to make Meal Time faster, easier and more enjoyable while saving money and spending wisely.

**A Menu: Plan Your Meals** - Many people have successfully prepared dinner for many years without using a menu. I'm not one of those people. The planner in me needs to...well...plan. Having a menu has completely changed the way I prepare meals for my family - for the better. Here's how:

1. Create 6 to 8 weeks of menus. Use the same 6/8 menus, just rotate through them over and over. Remember that a menu is simply a tool to organize your meal planning. It guides your shopping and makes dinner time less stressful because you know ahead of time what you will prepare. You don't have to change what or how you eat - your meal times will just be more organized. Start by writing down meals that your family enjoys eating.
2. Each menu week can be 5 or 7 days depending on your family's habits. I only plan 5 days each week because we eat with our Community Group on Sunday evenings and typically eat out or eat leftovers on Saturdays. Larger families may need to prepare more meals than smaller families as left overs will not be as abundant.
3. Don't overlook "cheat meals" that you prepare from time to time - it's perfectly acceptable to have Grilled Cheese as one of your menu items. In fact, I would recommend having at least one or two "cheat meals" every week (the bigger the family, the more cheat meals you should plan). It's important to not get burnt out on cooking, so quick easy meals are necessary. Any meal that your family enjoys is an acceptable menu item - sandwiches, frozen pizza, tacos, cereal. Just because you now have a menu doesn't mean you have to cook a three course meal every night.
4. Add variety - Once you've got a list of meals that your family enjoys be on the lookout for new recipes that you would like to try. Since you're rotating 6 or 8 menus you don't want to have the same dish too many weeks or you'll get bored quickly. Also make sure each week includes variety - you don't want to prepare a chicken dish five days in a row (unless you really love chicken). Plan each week so that there is a variety of foods.
5. Cook ahead - As much as possible, cook food ahead of time so that when it comes time to prepare dinner some of the work is already done. This is especially helpful with meat - chicken and ground beef can be cooked (and chopped up) and frozen ahead of time. Then you just have to pop it in the microwave for a minute or two to thaw and throw it in your dish. You'd be surprised by how much time you save when your meat is already prepared.

**Stockpiling** - One of the most powerful tools in the quest to reduce your grocery spending.

1. Build your stockpile by purchasing items when they are on sale rather than when you are about to use them. Keep in mind that store sales run in cycles and something that is 50% off this week will be 50% off again in 6 - 8 weeks. You only need to purchase enough to last your family until the next sale cycle. In other words, don't buy 18 boxes of spaghetti if you're only going to eat spaghetti three times in the next two months.
2. Use your menu to guide your stockpile purchases. Now that you have a menu you know exactly what items your family will eat. You aren't buying random items just because they are on sale - you're buying exactly what your family will eat.
3. Learn the "best price" on items you use often. For instance, I know that in my area boneless, skinless chicken breast is never going to be less than \$1.99 a lb. So, whenever I see this sale, I purchase enough chicken to last through the entire sale cycle (for our family this is about 30 - 40 lbs.). Is buying 30 lbs. of chicken excessive - maybe. But, I'd rather buy 30 lbs. at the sale price of \$1.99 per lb. than to buy it at regular price each week - which is generally \$4.99 a lb. That's spending \$59.70 in one purchase versus spending \$149.70 over a couple months. Stockpiling, in this example, saves me \$90.

**Simplify Coupons** - Using coupons can greatly reduce the amount of money you spend on feeding your family. Just remember that your time is valuable too and strive for balance when couponing.

1. Use your menu when selecting coupons to clip and save. If you're family never eats peanut butter there is no need to take the time to cut out the peanut butter coupon and file it away in your coupon system.
2. Consider purchasing coupons from an online coupon source rather than rummaging through the weekly paper. I have used CouponClippers.com for a while now and while I may not have access to as many different coupons I save a truck load of time and energy by having someone else do the sorting and clipping for me. The amount of time I save is more valuable to me than the two or three more dollars I would save at the grocery store.
3. Limit the number of stores you visit. By only shopping at one store each week you not only save shopping time but also preparation time. One store means one add to browse, one sale cycle to learn and one stop to make. Or, at the most, shop two stores - one grocery store and one drug store. Drug stores often have better deals on toiletry items and paper goods. It would be well worth your time to learn one drug store system as well as one grocery store in order to save money each week.

**Important Tip** - Be flexible from week to week. If your week is exceptionally busy, don't stress over meal time. You can pick and choose easy meals or substitute a few "cheat meals" or grab take out. It's also important to be flexible with your ingredients based on items in your stockpile. For instance - spaghetti is on your menu for this week but you're all out of ground beef and it isn't on sale. Rather than paying full price consider eating the spaghetti without meat or check to see if frozen meat balls are on sale or substitute fresh veggies such as zucchini, squash or asparagus (you'd be surprised how well marinara sauce can hide the taste of veggies from your kiddos).

As with any organization tool, a menu is just a tool - it should be helpful for you not something that makes you feel trapped or stuck in a certain routine. Modify your menu as needed so that you're comfortable and your family is happy.