



MAKING MEAL TIME WORK

If I had to pick the Neat Freak hill I'm willing to die on, it might just be mealtime at my house. I'm no gourmand, and if forced to identify my favorite hobbies, cooking may not enter the top 5. But I do feel strongly about creating a healthy meal for my family most nights and having us sit down and eat it together. Below, I'll share with you my favorite tips for making meal time work. Follow along and you may just find that you save time and money and, as a bonus, eat some amazing home cooked meals with the people you love.

- 1. Plan.** Well, okay, that may sound obvious. But I mean **really** plan. Sit down once a week with the people who consume food in your home and talk about the next 7 days. What events or activities impact mealtime? Late swim meet? Business meeting? Book club? Boss coming home for dinner? Snack mom for preschool? That's the kind of planning I'm talking about. Factor all of these events in as you plan your meals and shopping. Then start to build your shopping list around your real life.
- 2. Map out the meals you plan to prepare at home.** I like to spend my Sunday afternoons surrounded by my favorite recipes and cookbooks, a stack of sticky notes, and my calendar. I make decisions about what I want to cook (this can be really fun during farmer's market season when amazing local food is readily available) and then build a shopping list. I get the family involved and ask the kids to weigh in and make decisions about a meal a week. In another year or so, I'll be ready to let my kids do the cooking, too. After decisions are made, I write my meal plans in the calendar so there are no "what in the world are we having for dinner?" moments in our week.
- 3. Create a pre-printed grocery list.** This is, in all honesty, my meal planning lifesaver. Save your shopping lists for a couple of weeks. Sit down at your computer and type in the items you purchase regularly. Divide them into categories such as Produce, Baked Goods, Canned Goods, Snacks, etc. If you want to get super neat-freaky, arrange them in the order they appear in your grocery store. Update your list as needed and keep a few copies handy in your kitchen. As you run out of things during the week, circle them on your list. Then, when you're ready to have your planning session and shop, your list is good to go. Don't want to start from scratch? Just Google "preprinted grocery list" and you'll find a few good ones online.

4. Keep it simple. Have your family brainstorm their favorite 12 meals, stock up on the essentials and rotate those meals for a few months. Email friends with similarly aged children and ask what their family favorites are and swap recipes. No one expects gourmet food and total originality every night (at least, no one who eats at my table)!

5. When all else fails, it's time to cheat. Consider a meal planning service such as www.savingdinner.com or www.sixoclockscramble.com. If you want to make meal planning a social event, gather up some friends and cook large batches of food you can freeze and share. And if the thought of going to the grocery store practically brings you to tears, check to see if your store offers a shopping service that allows you to create and manage your shopping list online, place an order and pick up your food curbside.

I find that when I'm in my meal planning groove, my family eats healthy, fresh foods; my kids get to experience different tastes and textures; we save money by actually eating what we buy; and I save time by making only one (or sometimes two) trips to the store each week. And the biggest bonus? We spend a little time around the table, talking about our day and breaking bread together. Bon appetit!

ASK THE NEAT FREAK

Q: I've got shoes (kids' shoes, sports shoes, muddy shoes, stinky shoes) coming out the wazoo and no mudroom in site. Please help me tame my entryway and get this shameful pile of shoes in shape.

A: Oh, how I feel your pain. I've written before about my mudroom fantasies and so far, they haven't come true. Visit my blog to see snapshots of our makeshift mudroom that tames at least some of the shoes in our house (<http://neatfreak.wordpress.com>). Here are a few additional suggestions and products that might help:

1. Sort the shoes that pile up by the door and ask family members to return infrequently worn shoes to their closets (e.g. if you still have snow shoes readily accessible and you live in the northern hemisphere, give them the boot!)
2. Pair down (pun intended) the number of shoes your kids wear regularly. For summer, a pair of sneakers and pool shoes should suffice. If your child is currently playing a sport that requires special shoes, keep those handy, too.
3. Corral the mud/water/mess with a boot tray from an organizational store such as the Container Store (www.containerstore.com).
4. Think vertically! If you have a coat closet door near your entryway, consider hanging over-the-door shoe pockets on the inside of the door and have your kids put their shoes away in the lower pockets. Higher pockets are great for your shoes or sunscreen, bug spray, sunglasses and keys.
5. Consider keeping a plastic laundry basket (or two!) next to the door for kids to pile sports shoes in. Hose it out occasionally and quickly whisk it away if guests are on their way over.

6. Tools of the Trade:

- Shoe cubbies are readily available at Target or WalMart and can hold up to 24 pairs of shoes.
- I have a huge crush on the Horizontal Shoe Rack from Design Within Reach (<http://www.dwr.com/product/horizontal-shoe-rack-large.do?keyword=shoe+rack&sortby=ourPicks>). Quite pricey, but oh so awesome.
- Feeling crafty? Make your own similar solution such as this via Apartment Therapy (<http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/la/how-to/how-to-make-a-space-saving-shoe-rack-052593>).
- Finally, Ikea's TRONES shoe storage is attractive, handy and inexpensive for shoe storage in narrow spaces: (<http://www.ikea.com/us/en/catalog/products/10031987>).

Do you have a favorite shoe solution? Share it on my blog in the comments section @ <http://neatfreak.wordpress.com>.