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## Balanced Evening Meals for Happy, Healthy Families

April can be tough on family dinner time. In addition to usual hectic schedules, baseball and spring soccer seasons kick into high gear - adding practices and games on top of everything else. When time is tight, it's easy to slip into the fast food lane or microwave habit - with everyone eating at different times and places. While the drive-thru can take a toll on both nutrition and family togetherness, the experts have some easy tips on getting balance back into your busy evenings.

"There are several very simple steps that can help families manage their evenings," says Tara Andrews, MSU Extension agent in Custer County and mother of two daughters. "It all starts with just a little planning and mealtime organization. Then, you have to get the whole family involved in preparing and serving the meal. When everybody pitches in, no one feels overwhelmed. Actually, everyone feels much better when they are enjoying delicious, nutritious meals together."

Andrews definitely qualifies as an expert in mealtime management. As an Extension agent in Custer County, she currently oversees two popular programs to help families eat better and manage their food budgets more effectively. The quarterly *Quick2Fix* newsletter, distributed to Custer residents and Extension staff in Montana, features recipes and tips designed to make delicious dinners and pleasant mealtimes a reality for busy families. Thirty openings in the most recent *Kid's Chef School*, for 2nd and 3rd graders, filled up literally overnight after the flyer was sent home to Miles City families.

According to Andrews, the basics of quick-to-fix meals aren't complicated or difficult. "In fact, the best ideas are really the old standards, used by smart families for decades. Here are my favorite three tips. If these sound like things you've heard a hundred times before, they probably are - because these are the strategies that really work!"

- **Have a week's worth of menus in mind:** Whether you write them down or keep them in your head, families need 5 to 7 tried-and-true main dishes that are easy and popular with everyone. Once you have an entree - such as tacos, spaghetti, oven baked chicken, or crockpot stew - all you need to add is a vegetable and fruit to complete the meal.
- **Keep your kitchen stocked with quick-to-fix foods:** Whenever you shop, look for specials on frozen and canned fruits (in juice) and veggies. With a wide variety of tasty choices on hand, you'll only have to worry about the main entree when it's time to make dinner. Add fresh produce items when the price is right, as with the weekly features in store ads.
- **Prepare multiple batches of main ingredients:** If you're cooking ground beef, it's just as easy to cook a double or triple batch. Freeze extra family-size servings - ready-to-reheat for tacos or casseroles. For stir-fry dishes, slice and freeze extra beef, pork, or chicken - and veggies, so they're ready to drop into a wok or skillet for quick cooking on a busy night.

"Getting children involved in meals helps get dinner on the table quickly," notes Ms. Andrews. "Our experiences with the *Kid's Chef School* prove that children love to participate in meal preparation and that parents love to have a extra pair of hands to help with age-appropriate tasks." Need a new salad idea? The number one favorite dish of young Custer County chefs is a simple Waldorf salad: Chop a couple of crisp apples and mix with raisins and vanilla yogurt to taste.

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