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Montana's First Lady Promotes Family Mealtimes and Conversations

Ah September in Montana! As the seasons shift from summer to autumn, children head back to school and fall sports kick into high gear. After the lazy days of summer, schedules can easily become hectic and family mealtimes quickly turn into drive-thru dinners eaten in the car or in front of the TV.

"This is the perfect time to make a commitment to enjoying more dinners together," says First Lady Nancy Schweitzer, Honorary Chair of *Family Day* in Montana. "*Family Day-A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children*[™], celebrated this year on September 27th, is a national effort to encourage parents to have frequent dinners with their kids. Something as simple as a family dinner can have an important impact on our children's lives; there are so many school and life lessons that can be learned at the dinner table."

Family Day-A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children[™] is a national movement to inform parents that the engagement fostered during frequent family dinners is an effective tool to keep America's kids substance free. It was established in 2001 by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, based on research showing that the more often kids eat dinner with their families, the less likely they are to smoke, drink or use drugs. You can read the research, take the Family Day STAR Pledge, and download a free Family Dinner Kit at www.CASAFamilyDay.org.

According to the Eat Right Montana coalition, preventing substance abuse is just one of many important reasons to make family mealtimes a priority even during the busiest times of the year. Cooking, eating, and talking together can help children be happier, healthier, and more successful at school. Parenting and health experts agree that this is a simple family habit with significant long-term benefits. Here are some of the impressive benefits that accrue when families eat together five or more times per week:

- **School success:** Mealtime conversations translate into academic success. As children listen to adults, they learn language skills, such as new vocabulary and sentence structure. These skills, which are necessary for reading comprehension and for verbal expression, help children do better in the classroom and on tests.
- **Better nutrition:** When families make mealtimes a priority, they naturally tend to pay more attention to what is served. Children who have more family meals get more of the nutrient-rich foods that build strong bodies and smart brains: more fruits, veggies, lean meats, and milk; fewer fried foods and soft drinks.
- **Healthier weights:** Smart eating habits help children avoid problems like being seriously overweight or developing an eating disorder. During family meals, adults can model positive habits for kids, such as eating slowly, enjoying a variety of foods, and stopping when comfortably satisfied rather than overstuffed.

"By making the pledge to have more family meals, you are strengthening and uniting your family," notes the First Lady. "The time that you spend with your children improves their health, builds trust, and opens the door to communication. I also encourage families to talk about where your food came from and explore Montana's great local foods, and especially to cook the meal together!"

Past and current issues of Eat Right Montana's monthly packets can be downloaded for free at www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrighthealthyfamilies.htm

Treasure Your Family's Health: Back-to-Basics 2010