

Make Family Meal Planning Easier

By Amy Allen Clark

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Planning family menus takes work, but there are ways to achieve a week of fun and healthy meals – without overspending.

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1. Schedule, plan and prep

Pick one day to focus on meal preparation for the week – Saturday might be good since dad is probably home too. Make sure everyone knows he is the go-to parent during this scheduled time.

2. Go online

Use the Internet to find recipes that appeal to your family, are easy on your budget and include ingredients you already have in the pantry.

3. Make a menu

Develop a day-by-day menu. This will help you create your grocery list and stay focused at the store. Post this on the refrigerator so the entire family knows what to expect that week.

4. Make a list

Create a comprehensive list with everything you need for the week so you only have to shop once. Reference your weekly grocery flier to see which brands and products are currently on special.

5. Shop smart

Bring your list to the store to avoid impulse buying. Ask your grocer when items go on sale so you can plan your shopping trip to maximize savings. Visit the store earlier in the day when it is typically less crowded and you are less likely to be cranky, rushed or hungry.

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"I wanna help!"

Children of all ages like to be involved in food preparation and shopping. Engaging the kids will make your life easier as well.

Planning with parents

Have younger children make a little photo album of foods while you make your grocery list. They will learn shapes and identify foods as they cut pictures out of old magazines and create a grocery book. Have older kids help by checking the fridge and pantry for staples and suggesting menu ideas.

Amy's kid-friendly pantry



For babies

Canned fruits and vegetables (look for low-sugar options) and applesauce, on its own or for flavoring other foods like cereal.

For toddlers

Dried fruits like raisins, cranberries or prunes, whole grain cereal and peanut butter for crackers, bread, apples or bananas.

For school-age kids

Granola on its own or on yogurt, trail mix made from other pantry ingredients like whole grain cereal, dried fruit and pretzels, or wheat crackers.

For all ages

Macaroni or other fun-shaped pastas, which can be eaten alone or with veggies or red sauce.

Shopping with your kids

Have younger children bring their grocery book with them and check off items as they are found. (This might keep them occupied enough that they forget to ask for forbidden treats!) Or play "I Spy" with colorful and healthy foods ("I spy a yellow fruit").

Let kids help by finding items as you shop. School-age children can add prices into a calculator. Talk to them about price per unit and discuss which options might be better values.

Ask children to guess the total grocery bill. This gives them a sense of family spending and might keep them from asking for tempting checkout treats. When the final tally is told, praise them for their good efforts.

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After the store

Complete some work as soon as you get home. Time spent upfront will reduce stress all week and give you fast access to nutritious meals and snacks.

Chop it

Look at the week's menu. What you can prep immediately? If you are making chicken dishes, bake and dice your chicken right away. Put the cooked chicken in a container, date it and indicate ingredients to add later. Wash and slice fruits and veggies for snacks or meals.

Make it

Mix dry ingredients for cookie dough or pancakes. My family has homemade pizza night on Fridays, so I pre-mix the dry dough ingredients in zip bags and indicate what wet ingredients to add on the label. Next, I make a large batch of pizza sauce and divide it into freezer containers. I buy cheese and pepperoni in bulk and divide it into the portions needed for pizza. This upfront work keeps me stocked with two month's worth of pizza ingredients.



Bag it

Make bag lunches easier. Bag sliced fruits and veggies and store them where kids can easily see and grab them. I like my [Kenmore Elite® Fresh-n-Ready™ Bin](#). It's right on the door and keeps produce at stay-fresh temperatures. Measure out and pack portions of dipping sauce or dressing to give snacks extra kick.

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Meet
nutritional needs
at every age



Ask the doctor

Sit down with your pediatrician to learn what foods are key for each stage of development. Ask for a refrigerator chart of the quantity needed in each food group to help during meal planning.

If at first you don't succeed

Some kids eat everything; others are picky. Either way, it's important to keep putting food options in front of them. Expose them to a new food several times; maybe they will try it.

And the winner is...

If a child refuses to eat a certain food, don't stress – there is always another food to substitute or try kid-approved staples like pasta, cereal and toast.

Make it homemade

Prepackaged meals can drain a budget and add calories. Try my top five homemade convenience foods.

1. Lunchables

Slice your own fresh roasted turkey or chicken and skip the preservatives in prepackaged luncheon meats. Cube fresh cheese, add crackers and grapes and store in a sectioned container, ready for school lunch or snacks on the go.

2. Granola bars

Bake your own granola bars with dried fruit, nuts and granola. Your homemade bars will have less trans fat and preservatives.

3. One-dish skillet dinners

Throw together a stir-fry or a sloppy Joe dinner easily by making a meal kit in advance.

4. Trail mix

Combine whatever kid-friendly staples you have on hand and package into zip bags for quick snacks.

5. Soups and stews

This is where your slow cooker comes in handy. Make soup or stew from scratch with leftover chicken, vegetables and noodles or rice. Freeze in individual lunch portions for a nutritious, low-sodium option.

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Cook and eat together

Boost the fun factor at mealtime with these suggestions.

Kids' choice

Make mealtime special: let kids choose the menu and name the meal after them. If your daughter chooses spaghetti, call it "Pamela's Pasta Dinner." Ask the youngest child to make themed decorations; have older kids select music to play during dinner. Make this a learning opportunity by having kids research where the food originated and share what they learn during the meal.

Television host

Pull up a stool for toddlers and pretend you have your own cooking show, then narrate as you prepare. The visual and audio cues teach older kids about volume and measurements and young kids gross motor skills through stirring or pouring.

Get set

Let younger children help with small tasks like getting napkins. Older children can set the table, from getting dishes to placing utensils properly and folding napkins.

Next-day meals

Make future lunches or dinners as soon as a meal is over. Fill up sectioned containers (from the dollar store) for ready-to-go meal options.

Make a night of it

We sometimes have Seek and Ye Shall Find Night at our house, when everyone eats leftovers. It helps us be less wasteful, saves money and gives me a night off from cooking.

My Kenmore
appliances
make meals
easier



Keep warm

I use my oven's warming drawer almost every night to keep food warm while I prepare the rest of the meal. The **Warm n' Ready** drawer in the Kenmore PRO kitchen suite is also perfect for keeping food warm. Both are great features for parties as well.



Do dishes

I put everything in the dishwasher as I cook. After dinner, all I have to do is load dinner dishes and turn it on. With **Kenmore dishwashers**, I don't need to pre-rinse, soak or scrub. Many models utilize sensors throughout the cycle to gauge the soil level of dishes and use just the right amount of water and energy to ensure dishes come out spotless, saving time and money.



Cool off

We use the freezer to make icy treats. Place halved bananas on Popsicle sticks and coat with melted chocolate. Chill them on a baking sheet in the freezer, and you've got a sweet, healthy treat. A feature like the **Tilt N Take** freezer drawer in the **Kenmore Elite® refrigerator** makes storing snacks a snap.