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**EATING DINNER WITH YOUR CHILDREN SHOWN TO REDUCE
SUBSTANCE ABUSE; 'FAMILY DAY' SLATED SEPT. 22**

The more often children have dinner with their parents, the less likely they are to smoke, drink or use illegal drugs. To encourage the tradition of "family dinners," the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is urging parents to celebrate "Family Day: A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children" on Monday, Sept. 22.

Sponsored nationally by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University in New York City, Family Day is an annual reminder that parents can influence their children simply by sitting down to dinner with them, said Ben Brown, ODMHSAS deputy commissioner for substance abuse services.

"Teenagers who eat dinner with their families five or more times a week are at half the risk of substance abuse as those who eat dinner with their families only one or two nights a week," he said. "These kids also have less stress, less boredom and higher academic performance than those who eat dinner with their families two or fewer times a week.

"As teens get older, however, they are less likely to have dinner with their families," Brown added. "This is especially troubling because teen risk of substance abuse increases by almost 500 percent between the ages of 12 and 16. It is in these 'dangerous years' that most teens who use alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana initiate their use."

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Parents don't need to fix a gourmet meal; takeout pizza will do, he added.

“The real purpose of Family Day is to take time to get to know your children, to make a commitment to make family dinners a regular part of their lives,” Brown said.

“Parents need to realize they are the most powerful – and the most underutilized – resource we have to prevent drug and alcohol abuse by our kids.”

In addition to dining together, other family activities that can reduce the risk of child and adolescent substance abuse include helping with homework; attending religious services as a family and making religion an important part of kids' lives; praising and discipline children when their behavior merits it; monitoring television viewing, music purchases and internet usage; establishing curfews and knowing where kids are after school and on weekends; and sending a clear message of disapproval regarding the use of cigarettes, alcohol and illegal drugs.

Brown said parents can celebrate Family Day in the following ways:

- Eat dinner together. During dinner, turn off the TV and talk and listen to each other. Involve the entire family in planning and cooking the meal.
- If you can't have dinner together, try having breakfast together or engaging in another family activity.
- If your family eats together often, volunteer to serve a Family Day meal to children who don't have families.

“Eating dinner as a family may seem like a simple action, but it is one that can make a world of difference in the lives of young people.”

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