

Episode 443: Celebrating Family Mealtimes

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: And I think that's why we have traditionally looked at meals as the opportunity for good conversation.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: Our topic today, Andrew, is family time, eating together, because apparently there's a national day of this, and today's that day.

Andrew Pudewa: Really? I didn't know that.

Julie Walker: Well, and usually they come up with a national day of doing something either to promote some product, you know, National Avocado Day. I don't know when that is. It's probably

Andrew Pudewa: on maybe family eating together day.

Julie Walker: well, maybe it is

Andrew Pudewa: You never know.

Julie Walker: Yes, it could be. But I think in this case, they're recognizing. They, whoever they is,

Andrew Pudewa: Who is they?

Julie Walker: They're recognizing that fewer and fewer families actually take the time to eat together today.

Andrew Pudewa: You know who's recognizing this? Teachers in schools. They're noticing that the children are just not getting much quality time at home. And in a way, it's understandable because parents are working very hard. They work long hours. They are tired. The kids go from school into an after school thing so that the parents can work to make enough money to live. And then they get home and they're just so tired so they microwave a little bit of food, turn on a screen, and just sit there and eat food and, and kind of zone out because it does take energy and effort to deal with a family dinner time.

Julie Walker: It's true. It's true.

Andrew Pudewa: And like anything, the path of least resistance is to avoid it.

And it's a tragic thing, but it is a byproduct of our modern economy, our technology. Our value systems, are just very different. And so it is a sad but true thing, and I'm glad there are people who are trying to point this out and trying to establish—I've even seen at homeschool conventions talks on family mealtimes.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Like, this is how you do it. So we can get to some of that brass tacks in a little bit. I know that as you were raising your children, you advocated this, you talk about this sometimes in your talks and here on our podcast. Of course, my husband and I, we definitely had family time around the table. And how do you do that when you're a homeschooling mom and working? Because I was a working homeschooling mom, and my husband of course worked. And how do we fit in meal time especially when I was feeding three very hungry teenage boys? And busy, we were all very busy, but yet family time was very important to us.

But before we get into some of the nitty gritty and how, maybe you can share some tips and tricks on how you made that happen in your home and how I made this happen in our home, we're going to talk about four benefits of eating together.

All right, so eating together encourages healthier eating habits.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I think one of the tendencies of adults who are eating with children. I'll include all adults because it could be aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, but mostly parents, is to establish some good habits such as use your fork, chew with your mouth closed, don't talk while you're eating. You have to have a little bit of everything. Those types of rules are really fundamental for etiquette, later in life, when it matters,

You're eating with a person you'd like to have a friendship with or maybe a person of the opposite sex you would like to have a relationship with or you're eating with someone else's parents or a potential or existing supervisor in a job situation or a teacher. Those people are going to judge you, by your basic, almost instinctive, etiquette. So you don't want to have to think about how to be polite in company. You want to just have it be habit. And that really can only happen in a structured situation with adults guiding those things.

Julie Walker: Yes. Agreed. Agreed. So healthier eating habits, both, I'm thinking food choices, and I like what you said about taking a little bit of everything, but also social norms, you know, so that's healthy too, to be teaching healthy eating habits. Eating together. Here's the second benefit. There's many more. I just picked four.

Eating together can improve communication skills.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, if you learn not to talk with your mouth full. Then you are forced by nature to listen while you're chewing. And I have one grandchild in particular who isn't quite good at this yet because he really likes to just talk all the time. But if you point out, you

know, you need to not talk while you are chewing. I don't know if this encourages better healthy eating, because he will chew quickly, swallow, and then try to say stuff. But he's also growing, and he needs to eat. So, it goes both ways. But that little bit, and I think that's why we have traditionally looked at meals as the opportunity for good conversation because of the natural tendency to talk for a while, but then you're getting behind in clearing your plate of food because other people are almost finished.

So you realize, Oh, I better start eating and stop talking. And then someone else has a chance to chime in and share whatever they want to share on whatever subject may be floating around or start a new subject. And that's just been historically the case, probably all the way back to ancient times, I would guess, this eating together. And of course, people have written whole books on this subject. But that eating together promotes, I think, better listening and balance between listening and speaking.

Julie Walker: Right. So when I think about communication skills, I think about how the parents can really help to guide the conversation. And I think about sometimes when you say, if you ask a child, "What'd you do today?"

Andrew Pudewa: "Nothing" or "I don't know." Well, children are very much living in the moment. So they don't necessarily look back over their day or week or life and get at all reflective or philosophical. The most exciting thing will pop out, and they'll tell you all about that. Or they saw a movie, and that was the most exciting thing, and they'll tell you all about that. But the kind of calm-down-and-reflect, that's where the questions that the adults can ask can be helpful.

Julie Walker: So what would be some examples of those questions?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I will, rather than saying, what, what did you do this week or something, I might say, what was the most interesting thing that happened this week? To try to cause their mind to go somewhere or if they want to narrate the whole movie, I might stop them and say, "So what was the most exciting part of this movie? Or what in this movie made you think about something?" And just try to get specific. I think specificity is a real help for children's thinking. And one of my good friends once said, "My best advice to teachers, I would tell them on my deathbed, is ask specific questions of specific students." And this works in a family, especially if you've got two, three, four kids who all want to talk, and you don't want one to dominate, and so you kind of referee a conversation, if you will.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Thank you. Okay, just kind of piggybacking on that idea, eating together can improve children's self esteem.

Andrew Pudewa: I really don't like that term. It's just too modern, too progressive pop psychology. What I do think it can do is improves children's comfort level in a group, knowing that they can be heard and knowing they have responsibilities to listen. If their comfortability improves, their confidence improves. And I fear that when people use this self-esteem, they kind of fall into this cheerleading a kid and by telling them how good and great they are. Or really what you want to do is build confidence, whether it's in conversation or writing or knowing how to do household tasks or chore.

Now, most families will try to have the kids participate in the preparation of the meal, whether it's something really simple like the forks and the napkins on the table, or you get to help chop the vegetables for the stir fry, or it's your turn this week to be the person who gets to clear, gets to, they wouldn't necessarily use the same term, but clear the table. So, you know, this participation of children in the life and culture and flow of the family activities—that builds that comfortability, confidence, the participation level, and if you want to translate that into self esteem, I can live with it. But I think all too often that And that idiom just comes with so much modern thought.

Julie Walker: Yes, I would agree. And I think confidence is really what I was thinking about. And even that thing that you mentioned where you're kind of refereeing, “Tell me about this, daughter. Tell me about this, son.”

Andrew Pudewa: And saying little things like, “Wow, that was so interesting. Thank you for sharing.” And then they feel appreciated to some degree. I mean, that's what we all want to feel is important and appreciated and part of whatever we're doing.

Julie Walker: When you commented on this idea of having children help out, I gasped a little bit, like, I know you can read upside down, but I know you didn't read this.

Andrew Pudewa: I did not see anything on your paper over there.

Julie Walker: Yes, so here's one that says, there's a tag to this. Eating together may prevent adulthood obesity challenges. And the tag is, the study found that there was a lower rate of adulthood obesity, specifically only if the family meals eaten together were home cooked.

And I think about that idea of having the children help out making the meal.

Andrew Pudewa: Helping out, knowing, I mean, we know for a fact that whole foods that you can cook and make things are going to be better than the highly processed frozen or instant or packaged foods that have so much added this and oils that aren't healthy and all that. That's a fact.

Probably the number one predictor of adults who do cook their own food is going to be involvement in preparing food at home for the family. I think that's got to be the number one predictor. And I know I had to cook dinner twice a week because my mother was teaching music. So now it wasn't anything fancy. I had a small repertoire, hamburger helper, I could do fried chicken. I learned how to do that. Steamed vegetables. I learned how to do that. And so You know, the food wasn't particularly culinary art, but because I was doing that at 10, 11, 12 years old, when I started living alone, I had confidence. Whereas if I hadn't done that, I don't know, I might've been forced to eat at restaurants or buy pre-made stuff that was already cooked and you could just heat it up kind of things.

Julie Walker: Which there's two big knocks on pre-fabricated meals. One, as you mentioned, they're generally most of the time, not healthy. Secondly, they're also very expensive. You're wasting a lot of money.

Andrew Pudewa: I know a lot of 20-somethings who spend way more on restaurants because of DoorDash and Uber Eats. And so, “Oh, I don't feel like cooking. Well, let's just order up from P. F. Chang's.” And then you're paying the the price of the food, which is way more than the ingredients would cost you. You're paying for the delivery. You're paying the tax, and you're having to give a generous tip because we now believe that minimum tips are 30 percent or whatever. And so you look at young people and their budget, and they are spending two to three times on food what they would if they had learned how to boil rice and cook some, grill or roast something in the oven.

And so, in fact, I even heard that Walmart had established a how to cook your own food courses for people who didn't even know how to steam their own vegetables. They bought everything frozen and packaged. And what they found is that a family could reduce their grocery bill very significantly by learning to cook their own food.

So this was aimed at lower income families who are the most likely to not know how to do it. And the most stressed by the cost of food.

So yeah, I think it's very important. In fact, I would, as you know, love if some point we could do a food and nutrition-based writing lessons book and get some of that right in there.

Julie Walker: Yep. So these next few facts that I'm going to share, you're going to love this, Andrew, because it in some ways mirrors what you talk about in the *Cultivating Language Arts: Preschool through High School*

Andrew Pudewa: Oh,

Julie Walker: And these are the cooking at home, why this is helpful to the various ages and what you could have them help you with.

So babies and toddlers, why is it important to cook with your babies and toddlers?

Andrew Pudewa: Because you need extra cleaning of the floors, for to do penance for your sins.

Julie Walker: I guess, I guess.

Andrew Pudewa: How do you cook with babies and toddlers?

Julie Walker: You're going to love this, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Alright, let's hear.

Julie Walker: “Now, there aren't a lot of ways for babies to help in the kitchen at this age. They are just a baby after all, but being in the kitchen with you can still be beneficial. Since the baby is already in their high chair while you're cooking, try to make time in your kitchen a learning experience.”

So they're, they're smelling, it's all those senses, they're in the middle of it.

Andrew Pudewa: And if you've got one of those little stand up things where the young child can, this is a toddler thing mostly, but they can stand up in a thing that holds them in one place next to you while you're chomping things or whatever. And I think a lot of mothers will instinctively just kind of narrate to that young child what they're doing, thus building a vocabulary of a specific area of experience. This wouldn't happen if the baby was back in the other room watching a screen keeping out a mom's hair.

Julie Walker: The next one was preschoolers and little things like, as you say setting the table. My daughter in law. taught my granddaughter how to crack an egg way before I thought was reasonable, and

Andrew Pudewa: She could do it?

Julie Walker: She could do it. She could do it now, and now she's like, she's seven, and she will insist on cracking eggs

Julie Walker: She does a pretty good job.

Andrew Pudewa: We got these plastic. Knives that you could not possibly cut yourself with, but they are serrated and dull, but serrated. And so you can actually cut certain softer types of fruits and vegetables. And boy, the four year old will stand there and decimate your broccoli with this thing.

Julie Walker: Yeah, they'll love that, and I love that, because they're at the age where they want to help. Now, if you start them young,

Andrew Pudewa: They'll want to do it.

Julie Walker: Yeah, so school age, this is where I suppose it's appropriate to crack an egg, preheat the oven, stir the sauce, a lot of stirring you can do, because they're older and they know that stove is hot, don't get too close, sift flour, use a rolling pin.

The crazy thing is, is when's the last time, Andrew, you made a pie crust from scratch using a rolling pin?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. I don't actually eat things like that, but this reminds me of a very cute thing I heard once. So it was a father talking about letting his very young son help him mow the lawn. And he said it would be much easier if I just did it myself, faster, would look better, but he's getting the chance of doing it with the supervision, the safety, the guidance.

And he compared it kind of like the way God works with us. I thought this was sweet because, I mean, God could do everything without us, and it would be better, right? Easier. But God lets us participate in a super messy way in bringing things into existence because he loves us and wants us to grow up. After I read that, and it was many many years ago, it kind

of changed my attitude about letting kids slow you down by helping quote with air quotes “helping you.” It's not really helping in an objective sense, but for them it's life.

Julie Walker: When I was in the throes of homeschooling and working and trying to provide a clean house and well behaved kids, because that's what I always wanted in life, I stumbled upon this idea of once a month cooking.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yeah, you do this.

Julie Walker: I do, I still do this. And sometimes it's almost an obsession. And this is where I got together with a friend, actually. And our kids were all in the kitchen with us, or they weren't, but they were definitely in and out of the kitchen as we were making meals for the whole month. It allowed for planning ahead. We knew what we were going to serve. Maybe, maybe we didn't have it on the calendar, per se, that we're going to have this creamy baked chicken on November 7th. Maybe it was, it's in the freezer. It's now available. All I need to do is throw together a salad, and it's easy to go. And I think that investing that whole day, maybe a day and a half that it took, because you have to do the shopping before and then the cooking. It saved so much on our grocery budget.

Andrew Pudewa: And you would actually try to make like 30 full dinner meals all in one day.

Julie Walker: Yes, with the exception of a salad because

Andrew Pudewa: The fresh, fresh thing you want.

Julie Walker: yeah, but that was all done.

Andrew Pudewa: Or some fresh, you know, some rice you'd put, cause you wouldn't want to cook rice and freeze it and then reheat it.

Julie Walker: You could do that. Rice actually freezes really well and reheats.

Andrew Pudewa: I would just cook new rice every day, but I get your point. And that makes—what does that teach? Teaches preparation, work, hard work now for a benefit later, delayed gratification. And then your time goes smoother. You can use that time that you don't have to spend every day cooking.

Yeah. Is there a resource you would recommend, like, is if someone said, oh, I want to do this. I mean, you developed over time, I don't think I could just jump in and do it tomorrow. Did you have a book?

Julie Walker: Yes, it was actually a book and we'll put a link in the show notes because off the top of my head, I think it's called Once a Month Cooking and, you know, it came out in the 80s and it was on Focus on the Family and

Andrew Pudewa: There's probably any number of people now who have made YouTubes about this.

Julie Walker: right, exactly. Oh, yes. Meal prep and I do it a little differently now, especially because my husband and I— its just the two of us, but I did want to share this and this is. It's probably being a little more transparent than what I would normally do on a podcast. That's going out to all of y'all listening, but my husband and I, the two of us, and we often entertain. We have people over, or I'll bring a meal. Honestly, I brought a meal today for people to enjoy at work.

Andrew Pudewa: I noticed that. I thought, are we having a potluck?

Julie Walker: Nope. It's just, I had a great recipe I wanted to try, and it made way more than my husband and I could eat in a month.

Andrew Pudewa: And the good news is, I didn't eat this morning.

Julie Walker: Well, and my husband and I, if we try to, if we're being really good and really budget conscientious, we can spend \$200 a month on food. And that's all. And part of that is not going out to eat and using what we have in the house and being frugal.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and you buy good quality ingredients. You don't skimp on the quality to get your budget down.

Julie Walker: I don't.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I don't know. It sounds like more and more we should have a, some food-based writing lesson book to teach all these things. Make it at the middle school level so that they, you know, are old enough to get some of these ideas planted in their brain.

I can just see it. You'll write multiple source texts for Unit 6 on cooking for a month.

Julie Walker: for months. What's in my cooking? Wow, Andrew, you're making it sound like we actually have to do this.

Andrew Pudewa: One on shopping, one on storage containers.

Julie Walker: This is true. You've got to cook in glass because, you know, cooking in plastic is not going to be a good idea.

Andrew Pudewa: You don't want to do that. All right.

Julie Walker: All right. Well, I think that's enough to be said about cooking and eating together as a family.

Andrew Pudewa: And just to reiterate that the whole idea of food nourishing our body is connected with ideas and information and conversation and vocabulary, feeding our minds. That those, those can go hand in hand so beautifully almost have to one without the other, not so good.

Julie Walker: And I would just say, if you are, if you are not doing this at all and you barely can throw something in the microwave for your kids, just start with one meal a month, one meal a week and just see what you can do to start growing. Turn off the screens, put the phones down, and spend some time having family conversation and just see where this goes.

Andrew Pudewa: I think you could be the next like Julia Child. You could, we'll get, we'll move the cameras over to your house, and you can start doing little videos on how to make stuff and

Julie Walker: There are so many people who do it much better than me.

Andrew Pudewa: I don't know though. You're very inspiring in this way.

Julie Walker: Well thank you, Andrew.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.