



All Our Kids: Create Your Own “Family” Table

All Our Kids founders David Simpson and his wife Kathy Fletcher have a long tradition of Thursday Night Dinners, which they share with their son, Santiago (when he’s in town), and friends of his generation and their own.

On an average Thursday, 15 to 25 people share spicy chicken,* black rice, asparagus, salad and conversation, in an All Our Kids ([AOK](#)) dinner party that’s been going on for years.

After AOK was featured in the [New York Times](#) and on [NBC Nightly News](#), people across the country and the world wanted to know how they, too, could create something similar. [Encore.org](#) spoke with David Simpson to learn his “recipe” for dinners that nurture body, mind and spirit.

1. **All you need is a dining room table – and one kid.** There may be 25 people a week at David and Kathy’s table, but to get started, all it takes is caring adults and one kid. “No matter how many kids are at the table, if you show up for them, over time, and you show that you’re there for them -- that you would do for them what you do for your own child, and for other kids as well -- they become recruiters,” David says. “The word spreads, and other kids come.”

“If you start with one, do it right and give it time, your table will grow. I guarantee it.”

2. **Don’t do everything yourself – and keep things simple.** Kids and adults alike help with food prep; they scrape plates and clear. The menu is simple and decidedly un-fussy; cooking time is never more than an hour. Many hands really do make simple work, and everyone taking some part strengthens the sense of community.

3. **Create a structure that can breathe.** Thursday Night Dinners at AOK begin with a “toast of welcome” and include a “go-around [the table], so everyone has a chance to be the focus.” Cell phones are banned. For birthdays, David explains, “we offer good wishes and something we really love about the birthday person.” For new people, “we say something new about ourselves, or share something we are grateful for, and add a wish we have for the new person.” In this way, conversation shifts from informal twosomes to talking to the whole table (great practice for kids and adults alike, who all live in a world where social interaction seems ever more virtual). After dinner, the party moves to another room, where kids and adults play guitar and sing, read poems and share stories. “And typically, the evening wraps up by 9:30,” says David.

Your structure may differ, of course, but look to build something that can be consistent, predictable – and flexible enough to accommodate different numbers of guests, holidays and other events.

4. **Commit to the long haul and a role as ‘extra’ family.** Becoming a reliable resource for kids isn’t quick work. Actions speak louder than words. “Kids are in various states of readiness to trust; some come and eat, they don’t say much.” David and Kathy take a lot of direction from the kids – from the menu and the music to listening to the dreams and ideas that the young people bring to the table. “Rather than trying to force them into what we want for them, we really listen,” David says. “We accept them. We believe in them.” Building trust takes time, patience and a deeply stubborn belief in the kids themselves.

David and Kathy are very clear: “We don’t replace parents or families, we’re ‘extra’ family. We’re the backup. We would never presume to replace the parents in their kids’ lives or hearts. Our time together is about where the kids are going, not where they’ve been.”

5. **Shift your thinking from problem-solving to diamond-mining.** “For us, it’s about the kids and the diamonds they have inside of them.” But lots of kids don’t see that diamond in the rough. “A big part of our job is to help kids see and believe in their own potential. These kids are smart and creative and committed to making a difference. We can’t afford to let their potential go to waste—as families, as communities, as a country.”

6. **Invite other adults to help; everybody wins.** “We have no shame in asking friends to help,” David says – other adults bring dessert, provide moral (and occasional material) support, offer a shoulder to cry on – or guidance in a possible career path or artistic pursuit. Don’t be shy, David says. Mine your personal and professional networks. Seek out people who can tolerate ambiguity – a quality in abundance for most teenagers. “People want to help, people are good,” he says. “They want connection, they want to use the fruits of their labor in responsive and positive ways.”

“Our kids invite me to be my best self about ten times a day,” David says. “And I’m a better version of myself because of their influence.” Developing a strong, rich, intergenerational community that supports kids “releases their potential – and helps grown-ups feel part of something meaningful and deep. That’s a win for everyone.”

***All Our Kids’ Spicy Chicken “Montego Bay”**

8 to 10 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
1 tablespoon dried basil
1 tablespoon coarse salt
1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon ground cumin
2 tablespoons dried oregano
2 tablespoons dried coriander
2 tablespoons McCormick’s Perfect Pinch rotisserie chicken seasoning
1 bulb garlic, cleaned and broken apart (not peeled)

2 tablespoons olive oil

In a shallow bowl combine all dry ingredients.

Toss the garlic bulbs in olive oil and place in bottom of 9 x 13 pan; place chicken on top.

Brush chicken with olive oil, shake off any excess and roll in spices.

Cook uncovered at 400 degrees for an hour or until well-browned.

Enjoy!

(Plan on two thighs per serving. David says, “We count how many people are coming and we add four pieces – even if there’s extra left over, it’ll be gone by the end of the night.”)