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Samantha McKenzie turned to an expert for help when she wanted to lose weight but didn't want to prepare separate meals for herself and her family. Here, daughter Isabella helps her make dinner.

Mealtime makeovers

TWO BUSY MOMS TACKLED THE CHOWTIME CHALLENGE — NOW GO SOLVE YOUR OWN

BY JESSICA ELLIOTT | STAFF WRITER

With all of life's demands, it's a struggle to get dinner on the table, let alone prepare a healthy meal.

So how can families eat right?

We offer two case studies of harried families with more than a dash of healthy advice from nutritional experts thrown in.

Short-order syndrome

After the birth of her second daughter, financial manager Samantha McKenzie was in a post-baby-weight slump. With little time to cook, the Richardson mom was struggling to strike a mealtime balance.

"I didn't want to take supplements, eat packaged meals, or cook something separate," she says. "I didn't want to be eating a Lean Cuisine while they were eating something else."

Plus she wanted her children, Isabella, 8, and Sophia, 4, to grow up making healthy food choices.

In 2009, after receiving a Canyon Creek mom's club recommendation, she sought the help of registered dietitian Angela Lemond to make a meal plan.

Before their first meeting, Lemond who is the MommyDietician.com blogger and mother of two, asked McKenzie to record everything she ate for a week.

"I lost two pounds before I even saw her," she says, laughing. "I wasn't going to Burger King or McDonald's, but once I realized how big my serving sizes were, it dawned on me that I was eating more than I should be."

Lemond honed in on McKenzie's exercise regime, exact calorie goals and recommended *The Six O'Clock Scramble: Quick, Healthy and Delicious Dinner Recipes for Busy Families* (St. Martin's Griffin, \$17.95) and later, *Keep the Beat Recipes: Delicious Family Meals* National Institutes of Health, free at <http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/healthyeating>), which have easy-to-make, low-calorie meals that her entire family could enjoy.

"I would go to Central Market where I purchase my fish, and ask for enough for two adults and two kids. Well, I came to realize that even with something as healthy as salmon, we were eating one-and-a-half to two times the serving size," says McKenzie, 38. "I started cooking slightly differently, and paying attention to serving sizes."

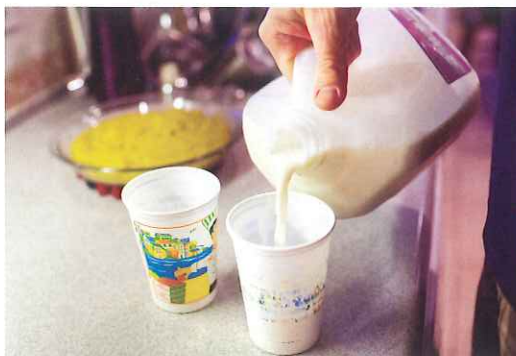
She also learned to do advance prep work.

Now McKenzie tag-teams meals with husband Keith and gets cooking help from daughters Sophia and Isabella, who are working on Crunchy Chicken Fingers with Tangy Dipping Sauce and Pesto Baked Polenta.



Photos by Carter Rose/Special Contributor

With advance planning, the McKenzies have time to cook healthy meals that are enjoyed by all.



Carter Rose/Special Contributor.

"I plan out all my meals for the week, then go grocery shopping on the weekends. I write out my list so I know what aisles to be in."

And she tag-teamed meals with husband Keith, who arrives home earlier. "I take the meat out of the freezer the night before," she says. "I'll try to prepare as much of the meal the night before as possible — sometimes chopping the vegetables. I'll get out the pot he needs, the measuring spoon, the spices he needs."

After about six months, she had lost 25 pounds and her husband had inadvertently dropped 30.

"My husband has been healthier, my kids are healthier and I have a better grasp on what kinds of things I need to feed them to make sure the meals are balanced," she says, "and the kinds of snacks to send to school."

The extracurricular shuffle

Two years ago, Highland Park mother of three Judy Schmitz also was struggling. Her three children were in multiple evening activities and they were frequently buying takeout dinners.

"We've been a family who has always wanted to have our meals together, and suddenly I was pulling my hair out," she says. "So it became, 'How do I make time to have family meals?'"

"One of my kids really loves carbs and the other really loves meat," she says. Her husband doesn't like casseroles and "I don't like a lot of repeats," all of which complicated planning.

After six months of reading books and doing personal research, Schmitz was even

more confused.

"I felt like my head was literally spinning because you could find a book that would support almost anything," she says.

She sought help from Cooper Clinic co-director of nutrition and registered dietitian Patty Kirk.

"I came to Patty saying, 'I don't know what to feed my kids, I don't know what portions to give them, and I don't know how to feed them because I'm not home during dinnertime. Let's start from scratch.'"

Kirk helped her streamline the meal-planning process, suggested sources for healthy recipes and encouraged her to involve her two teens and 11-year-old. On Kirk's advice, Schmitz decided to try two new recipes a week and sat down with her family to discuss

a "thumbs-up, thumbs-down" signal. If they didn't like it, she cut it from her rotation.

She bought *7-Day Menu Planner For Dummies* (For Dummies, \$19.99) and *Cooking Light Fresh Food Fast* (Oxmoor House, \$24.95). Her teens were given the chance to choose a recipe by Sunday — if they didn't, they couldn't complain about her selections.

"I didn't want to have this war at mealtime," Schmitz says.

"I found that if I was making food in the house, once [they smelled] the aroma of the cooking, they were hooked," she says. "And it didn't matter what I was making. I've cooked duck, rabbit. Once I get the onion and garlic sautéing, they're hooked."

Along with having fruits and vegetables for snacks, Kirk counseled Schmitz to involve her

teens in the lunch-packing process. She took them to the grocery store to choose which kind of bread they wanted for lunch.

Kirk suggested Schmitz use the crock pot to solve the problem of kids eating at different times because of evening activities.

"I can go to the grocery store and buy two or three days' worth of meals, and boom, dinner is done," she says. "I still want whoever's not going to be there to have a hot meal ... with the crock pot, you can have a truly great meal that will stay warm for hours."

In the past, she was outsourcing family meals from Central Market or Ziziki's. But once Kirk showed her the nutritional content, she chose to make most of her meals at home.

Winning strategies

"I find that if you can get the parents healthy, it really trickles down to the kids," says Lemond, who also faces dinnertime challenges as the mother of Hannah, 7, and Evan, 4.

"You have to believe that it's important enough to put it higher on your priority list."

She recommends that families balance meals using the government's My Plate visual (ChooseMyPlate.gov), a color-coded plate that shows the amount of grains, vegetables, fruits, protein and dairy needed.

The next step: incorporating new recipes and planning ahead. Lemond recommends

I had a girl who liked salsa, and she dumped it all over everything — but it helped her to like vegetables."

Patty Kirk, Cooper Clinic nutritionist and registered dietitian

MealMakeoverMoms.com, and *No Whine with Dinner* (M3 Press, \$24.95), by moms and registered dietitians Liz Weiss and Janice Newell Bissex. The book has 150 kid-tested recipes and the website has tutorials on finding and making kid-friendly food.

Through her website, AngelaLemond.com, she launched "Eat with Angela," a \$5 weekly service that provides families with seven dietitian-crafted recipes and a grocery list.

"Meal planning is often the most intimidating and time-consuming thing that moms can't seem to navigate," she says.

Lemond and Kirk both stress the importance of avoiding short-order cooking and crafting just one nightly family meal.

"Really and truly, the parent's role is as the provider," Kirk says. "And the child's role is the decider. If you're providing healthy foods, they're going to eat them or not. Now, that doesn't mean they get to go to the candy drawer. They either eat it or they don't."

Kirk, who developed the Cooper Healthy

Habits for Kids nutrition education program and works one-on-one with children, says that it's also important to provide multiple options that are served repeatedly.

"It requires 10 to 20 times of tasting a new food before a child will accept it," she says. "And many times, if you can find a vehicle for them to eat it, they will. I had a girl who liked salsa, and she dumped it all over everything — but it helped her to like vegetables."

Mealtime participation also fosters a child's willingness to eat, Kirk says.

"Take your kids to the store and have them pick out a new fruit or vegetable to try, then they can buy into that. And studies show that if you put children in the kitchen, they have ownership of that recipe and want to try it."

Lemond also encourages sit-down dinners with few distractions.

"There are so many positive statistics on eating meals as a family — beyond nutrition but also self esteem at school, and success later in life," she says.

If dinner isn't possible, aim for breakfast.

"Just get one meal in," Kirk says. "Turn off the phones and the television and concentrate on eating and make it a true experience. When you do that, and converse with your children, it slows them down so they can develop this internal cue of fullness."

But above all, Kirk says, "strive for progress, not perfection."

Angela Lemond's tips for food fast

1. Plan meals at least one week in advance.
2. Stock the freezer with frozen fish, meat and vegetables.
3. Fill your pantry with food staples, such as canned tuna, dried beans and whole grains.
4. Stretch meals by reworking leftovers with pantry items.
5. Find quick-and-easy recipes first, then adjust where necessary to make them healthier.
6. Buy pre-cut or ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables.
7. Cook foods in advance and freeze in family-size portions.
8. Mix takeout with prepared foods. For instance, pair a side salad with pizza.
9. Make a meal out of healthy snack foods, such as cottage cheese, crackers and fruit.
10. Include fruits and vegetables with every meal and snack.



**Nutritionist
Angela
Lemond**

No recipes required

Top whole-grain pasta with frozen or canned shrimp sautéed in olive oil, onion and garlic. Add a bagged side salad and low-fat yogurt topped with berries.

Bake chicken breasts and serve with wild rice and frozen vegetables.

Wrap beans and cheese in a whole-grain tortilla and serve with corn mixed with red peppers (seasoned with paprika and a dash of salt).

Craft a cheese, spinach and onion omelet and serve with a tossed salad and a whole-grain roll.

Make a tuna-salad wrap with reduced-fat mayonnaise, Swiss cheese, lettuce, tomato and red onion. Add a side of fruit.

Lemond Photography