

# De-Stress Your Dinner

Four obstacles to meal planning—and how to overcome them.

BY SARAH PROTZMAN HOWLETT

For many families, meal planning—deciding in advance what you'll eat each night of the week—is the secret sauce for feeding a brood without a side of stress. But if you're like most busy parents, perhaps you've had a series of false starts on your meal-planning journey and never quite formed the habit, even though you know it can prevent last-minute scrambling, extra trips for one missing ingredient and that dreaded bag of rotting spring mix in the crisper drawer.

Laura McCall, a mother of two and culinary nutrition expert at Golden Root Nutrition in Boulder, Colorado, is highly familiar with the reasons many families struggle with meal planning. But she also knows the freedom that's found in a little prep work is closer than it feels.

"The thing about meal planning is that you're already doing it on some level," she says. "At some point, we all decide what we're going to eat each meal. But for busy families, dinner tends to be the hardest to pull off due to afternoon activities and the fact that dinner-type meals often take longer to prepare."

In her meal-planning classes, McCall offers simple and actionable ways to help families overcome common obstacles. Here are four of her breakthrough solutions.

## THE ROADBLOCK

**Soccer, piano, late meeting, repeat.**

### THE WAY FORWARD

Weeknights can be crazy, so plan meals accordingly. If you're dropping off and picking up kids from various activities all evening, will you also have time to make an elaborate meal from scratch? Probably not—so take it easy on yourself. "Maybe it's not realistic to cook at all on soccer night, and that's OK," McCall says. "Instead, think

about stocking your freezer on the weekend with healthy homemade soups and casseroles you can simply reheat on busy nights." McCall's go-to dinner when she is short on time: a doctored-up jar of store-bought pasta sauce, with sautéed onions, garlic, mushrooms and spinach. Serve over whole-grain brown-rice pasta.

## THE ROADBLOCK

**Not setting aside time for meal planning each week.**

### THE WAY FORWARD

Think about your typical seven-day stretch: Do you almost always have a half-hour on Sunday afternoon that could work to sit down and write a meal plan and shopping list for the week? Pick a time—whatever and whenever works for your schedule—and make it as nonnegotiable as possible, surveying your pantry while you choose recipes. (You might be surprised what you already have on hand.) Search for a template you like: There

are dozens of printable options online; we like ones with a fill-in weekly calendar and grocery list on the same page (check out [livecrafteat.com/printable-weekly-meal-planner](http://livecrafteat.com/printable-weekly-meal-planner)). "Once you've created three or four meal plans and their corresponding shopping lists, you can reuse them—no need to reinvent the wheel each week." Or simply use a piece of notebook paper, like McCall does, with lines drawn for each day.



### SUPPLY LIST

McCall recommends a few simple items, all found in the school-supply aisle, to jump-start an organized meal-planning routine. A **three-ring binder** and **sheet protectors** can corral any recipes floating loose in a drawer that you've been meaning to try, and also provides a place to store new ones found online and printed. Level up by also purchasing **tab dividers** and **sorting recipes by breakfast, lunch and dinner**. For recipes from books, consider **photocopying the page** and placing it in the binder as well for easy access.

### THE ROADBLOCK

**Fear of food boredom.**

#### THE WAY FORWARD

Meal planning doesn't have to mean making the same seven meals each week. However, McCall says, it helps to have daily categories that provide a framework. Alliterations are optional, but ideas include Meatless Monday, Taco Tuesday, Warm-Up Wednesday (read: leftovers) and Slow-Cooker Saturday. Many families also include a weekly "scrounge" night to use up odds and ends and avoid food waste.

"This creates a rhythm and routine that benefits both parents and kids," McCall says. "For parents, it becomes a touch point for recipe inspiration and also a quick way of remembering what is planned for dinner that night. For kids, the consistency helps decrease picky eating. They quickly learn that, while Meatless Monday might not be their favorite, that's what the whole family is eating."

### THE ROADBLOCK

**Overly complex recipes.**

#### THE WAY FORWARD

Newcomers to meal planning often underestimate the amount of dicing and simmering some meals require, McCall says. Though mouth-watering Instagram images might lead you to think otherwise, it's perfectly OK to keep things simple. On busy nights, McCall advises steering clear of recipes with more than 10 ingredients and looking carefully at the "total time" metric. "Often, recipes do not account for things like

marinating or brining time," she says. "Make sure to read through the recipe twice before you put it in your weekly rotation." Additionally, read recipes with an eye toward what can be done ahead. Maybe as you're making school lunches, you also dice a couple of carrots for that evening's vegetable soup. Try new recipes on nights you have a little more time, and go with one you know by heart when prep time is limited.