Who's Home for Dinner?

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Ethan's stomach rumbled as he raced into the house after school. "What's for dinner?"
"Frozen pizza," answered his brother Jacob.
"Again?" complained Ethan. "Where's Mom?"
"Working late."
Looking around, Ethan asked, "Where's Dad?"
"At the fire station."
Ethan frowned. When Mom and Dad weren't home, Jacob ate in front of the TV. Ethan hated eating at the table with three empty chairs. He sighed. His friend William probably wasn't eating dinner all by himself.

BRRRING! Ethan answered the phone. "Hello?
"Hi," said William. "Can you come for dinner?"
After checking with Jacob, Ethan said, "I'll be right there."

Ethan ran next door.
“Hi,” said William, opening the door.
Ethan snickered. “What’s that?”
“It’s my apron. Dad and I are making chili.”
Ethan followed William into the kitchen. They passed Granny, and William’s little sister Olivia snuggled on the couch, watching cartoons.



After Ethan washed his hands, William’s dad let him grate cheese. Ethan scooped the grated cheese into a bowl and carried it to the table.
William called, “Turn off the TV! Dinner’s ready!”
When they were seated, William’s dad ladled chili into their bowls. Ethan sprinkled grated cheese on his chili. Yum!

As Ethan scraped his bowl clean, Granny asked, “Olivia, what was the best part of your day?”
“Recess.”

Then Granny asked Ethan, “What was the best part of your day?”
“Eating with all of you,” Ethan answered. “May I have more chili, please?”

As Jacob walked him home after dinner, Ethan said, “I like how William’s family eats together.”

“We used to.”

“We could make dinner for our family,” said Ethan.

“Me? Cook?” asked Jacob.

“You and me,” said Ethan. “If William can cook, so can we.”

The next day Ethan’s class went to the library. He found a chili recipe in a children’s cookbook. He couldn’t wait to show it to Jacob.

After school, Mom told Ethan, “I have a meeting. Jacob will be home from practice in ten minutes. He can fix a frozen pizza.”

Ethan grinned. He knew he wasn’t eating frozen pizza.



When Jacob arrived, Ethan showed him the recipe.

“Can we make it?”

“Maybe,” answered Jacob. “Is there ground beef in the freezer?”

Ethan saw chicken, meatballs, and pizzas. “No ground beef.”

“Some people make meatless chili,” replied Jacob. “Is there an onion?”

Ethan looked in the refrigerator. “Yes!”

“Tomato sauce?”

Ethan opened the cupboard and held up a jar of spaghetti sauce.

“That might work,” said Jacob. “Do you see kidney beans?”

“Just baked beans.”

Jacob said, “Let’s have frozen pizza.”
“Wait!” cried Ethan, pointing to the recipe on the next page. “Can we make this?”
“Skillet spaghetti,” read Jacob. “We have sauce and meatballs. Is there spaghetti?”
“In the cupboard.”
Jacob looked for the skillet. Ethan gathered the spaghetti, meatballs, and sauce. Soon dinner simmered in the skillet.
“What smells so good?” asked Dad, walking into the kitchen.
“Skillet spaghetti!” announced Ethan.



“Mom arrived as they were sitting down. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “It’s been ages since we’ve eaten together. Thanks, boys!”

The next day after school, Ethan smelled something yummy in the kitchen. Mom had dinner cooking in the slow cooker!

A note said:

We’ll eat at 6:30. You can invite William.

“Yippee!” shouted Ethan. He called William.

When Dad came home, he asked, “What should we do until 6:30?”

Ethan suggested, “Play Go Fish.”

“Eat popcorn,” added Jacob.



They played Go Fish and ate popcorn. They played Crazy Eights and Old Maid. They didn't notice when the clock said 6:30 . . . or 7:00 . . . or 7:30.

When Mom came home, she cried, "What's that smell?" and ran into the kitchen. "Oh no! I left the slow cooker on high."

"Yuck!" said Jacob, peering into the pot. "It's scorched."

Dad threw open the windows.

Mom wailed, "Dinner's ruined!"

"Don't be sad," said Ethan. "It was a good idea."

"A great idea," agreed Dad, hugging her.

"A wonderful idea," said Jacob. "But I'm starving."



Ethan ran to the freezer. He pulled out two pizzas. Handing them to Jacob, he said, “Turn on the oven. Dinner will be ready soon.”

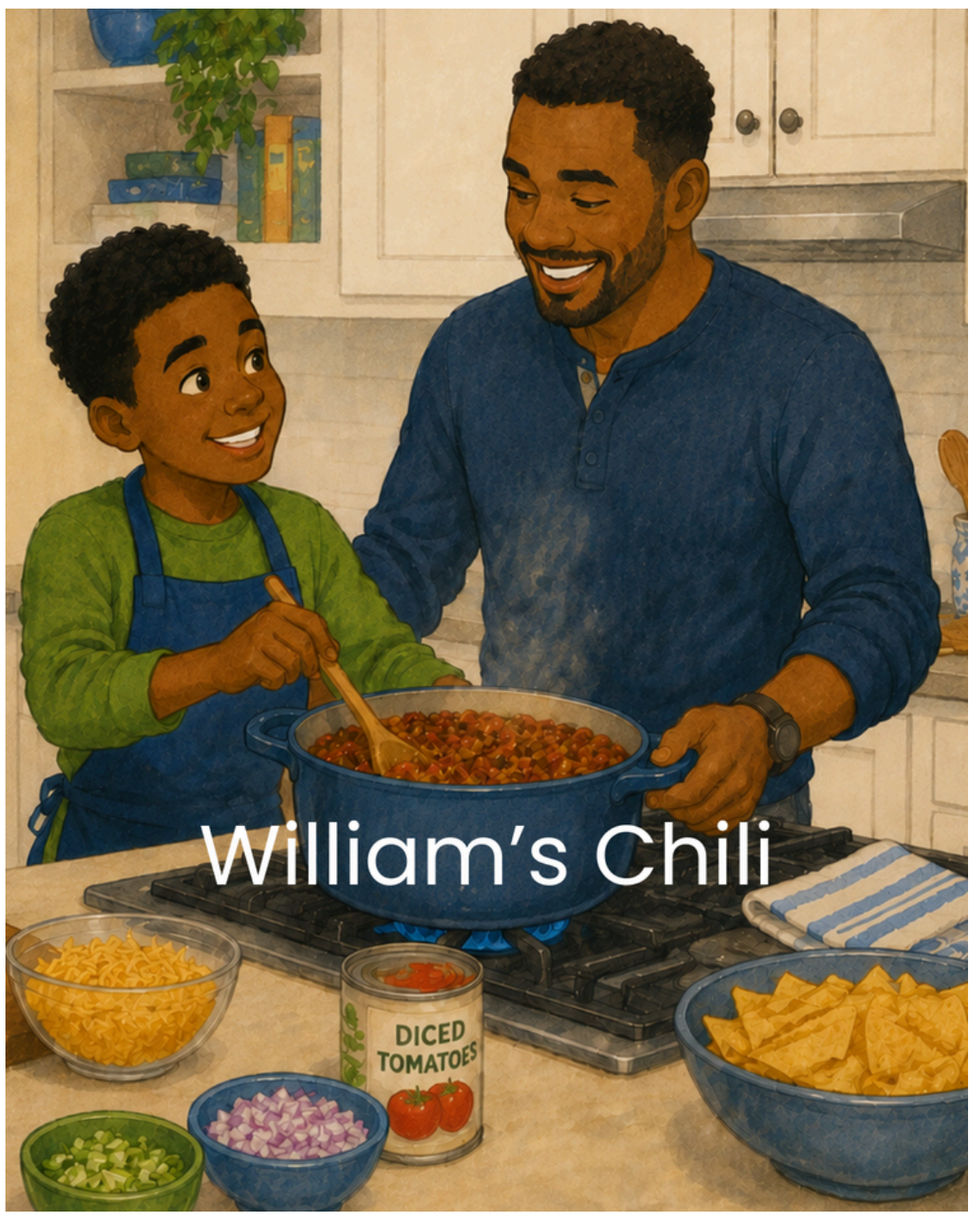
Ethan and William set the table. Before long, it was time to eat.

“I love frozen pizza!” exclaimed William.

Ethan smiled. “I love eating together!”

~ The End ~

Who’s Home for Dinner? Recipes from the story.





Do you cook together as a family?

Cooking together as a family is not only fun and relationship-building, but it can also result in healthier meals, teach important lifelong skills, and build self-esteem and confidence.

Would you like to try William’s Chili and Ethan’s Skillet Spaghetti?

William's Chili (6-8 servings)

2 pounds ground beef or turkey (2 tablespoons olive oil if using ground turkey)
1 onion, chopped (1 cup)
2 cloves garlic, minced or crushed
1 (28-ounce) can diced tomatoes, undrained
2 (15-ounce) cans tomato sauce
1 (4.5-ounce) can chopped green chilies, undrained
2 (15-16-ounce) cans kidney, pinto, or red beans, drained and rinsed well
1 teaspoon salt
¼ to ½ teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon cumin
1-2 tablespoons chili powder

Optional seasonings:
½ - 1 teaspoon cinnamon and 1 tablespoon brown sugar (These cut the spiciness and add a sweet taste.)
Optional add-ins:
½ - 1 cup each chopped celery and chopped green pepper, cooked with the onion and garlic

1. Brown the ground beef in large soup pot with the chopped onion and garlic. Drain well and return to pot. (If using ground turkey, add 2 tablespoons olive oil to the pot first.)
2. Add tomatoes, tomato sauce, beans, chilies, and seasonings. Bring to a low boil, reduce heat, cover and simmer over low heat until ready to serve. Stir occasionally. Longer cooking enhances flavors.
3. Serve with shredded or grated cheddar cheese, sour cream, chopped green onion, crackers or tortilla chips.

Ethan’s Skillet Spaghetti (6-8 servings)

26-ounce jar spaghetti sauce
4 cups water
18-24 frozen meatballs
12-ounces uncooked spaghetti pasta
Optional: shredded mozzarella cheese
Parmesan cheese

1. Pour spaghetti sauce into a deep skillet that is 12-inches wide or wider. If you do not have a skillet this large, a large pot works well.
2. Pour two cups of the water into the emptied jar. Screw on the lid and shake to rinse the sauce off the sides and bottom of the jar. Pour this water into the skillet. Add the remaining 2 cups of water to the sauce.
3. Add frozen meatballs to sauce. Add 3-4 meatballs per person.
4. Bring sauce to a boil over medium heat.
5. Break the pieces of spaghetti pasta in half and add them to the sauce.
6. Stir to cover the pasta with sauce and to keep the pasta from sticking together. Cover with lid. Return to boiling; then lower heat to simmer.
7. Cook on low heat for 25 minutes. Stir occasionally. Pasta should be done without being overdone. See below for cooking times for other types of pasta.
8. Serve with shredded mozzarella cheese and Parmesan cheese.

Other types of pasta work well in this recipe. The cooking time will be a little more than double the suggested cooking time that is written on the pasta box or bag. See next page.

Type of pasta	Regular cooking time	Skillet Spaghetti cooking time
Regular or whole-grain spaghetti	11-12 minutes	25 minutes
Thin spaghetti/ Vermicelli	7-8 minutes	15-16 minutes
Angel Hair pasta	5-6 minutes	12-15 minutes
Ready-cut spaghetti	6-7 minutes	14-15 minutes
Elbow macaroni	7-8 minutes	15-16 minutes
Rotini pasta	9-10 minutes	20 minutes

Who's Home for Dinner?
Ideas for parents and teachers.



Who's Home for Dinner? Ideas for Parents:

Does your family look like Ethan's?
Do you have trouble finding time to sit down together to eat a meal? You're not alone! Many families would like to have family meals more often. Most families would like meals that are easier to get on the table. Other families struggle with making their meals more enjoyable and relaxed. What are your goals for family meals? Read on. Discover how mealtimes can be a time for sharing good food, laughter, and love.

What is a family meal?
A "family meal" is when the people you live with come together to eat and talk. It can include everyone, or just you and your child. Family meals don't have to be fancy, and they can be eaten at home or away. A meal around a table in a restaurant can be a family meal, as can carry-out eaten at your kitchen table, or a picnic on your living room floor. All it takes is a family eating together. The benefits of family meals come from the time spent reconnecting with each other. Removing distractions such as the TV and telephone helps family members talk and listen to one another.

What are the benefits of family meals?
Building closer families is the number one reason parents and children value eating meals together. Family meals make children feel like they belong and are loved. They are a great place to share your daily lives and pass down your values and traditions. Children who eat with their families do better in school. They learn how to be polite and get along with others. Talking at meals teaches children new words, how to express ideas, and how to talk with others. Children who eat with their parents are less likely to smoke, drink, take drugs, get into fights, become sexually active, or commit suicide. Children who eat with their families eat better, learn better eating habits, and are less likely to develop eating disorders. Eating family meals can help children reach a healthy weight. At family meals parents can role model positive behaviors.

How can family meals be happier, healthier, and happen more often!?

- Plan when you can eat together and put the dates on your family calendar. Be realistic; if not dinner, eat breakfast together, or Saturday lunch. Start small.

- Find a location that allows you to have pleasant conversations. Clean off a table if you need to. Invite family members to create fun decorations.

- Think of quick, healthy meals your family likes. Make a shopping list, so everything is on hand. Get everyone involved in cooking and cleaning up.

- Turn off the TV. Put away phones. Plan conversation starters to get your family talking.

- Think about what makes family meals pleasant. Be a role model for how you want your child to behave.

Who’s Home for Dinner? Ideas for Teachers:

Ways to integrate this book into the school or homeschooling curriculum:

- Discuss meals that students like to eat with their families and friends.

- Invite them to bring in a recipe for one of their favorite foods.

- Search for children’s cookbooks in the school library. Invite them to look for them in the local library. Where else can they find recipes? Try finding them online. How does their family store special recipes?

- Does their family have a favorite chili recipe? Invite them to find other chili recipes. How many different chili recipes can your class find? What do all these recipes have in common? What makes them different? Do the same for variations on spaghetti.

- Look for active cooking verbs in recipes such as cut, chop, mince, brown, measure, pour, etc. Invite a chef or good cook to demonstrate several of these cooking verbs for the students. Play charades using these cooking verbs after the students have learned what they mean.

- Notice weights and measures used in recipes.
    - Discover how many ¼ tsp. are in a teaspoon, how many teaspoons in a tablespoon, how many tablespoons in a cup, etc.
    - Learn about ounces and pounds and notice these weights in recipes.
    - Try doubling or halving a recipe. Discuss times when you might want to do each.

- Gather recipes for a class or family cookbook.

- Create meals for each of the recipes they brought. Draw pictures of those meals or make a collage using food pictures from magazines.

- Ask students what other foods they think William's family might have eaten with the chili. What might Ethan's family have eaten with the skillet spaghetti? What might they have eaten with their frozen pizza?

- How did Ethan encourage his family to eat together? Discuss ways they can encourage their families to eat together.

- Show students how to set a table. Provide opportunities for them to practice setting a table. Discuss how setting the table encourages families to eat together.

- Encourage students' families to plan a meal with William's chili, Ethan's skillet spaghetti, or frozen pizza. Ask students to write a story about their family making the meal. Who shopped for the food? Who prepared it? Who served it? Who ate it? Who cleaned up? What did they eat with the chili, spaghetti, or pizza? What did they talk about as they ate? What was their favorite part of the meal?

- Invite families to a class potluck. Invite each family to bring a favorite main dish, side dish, or dessert.

For more on family meals,
check out these resources and posts:
https://www.nutritioncommunicator.com/promotingfamilymeals



Meet the Authors:

- Carolyn Short and Barb Mayfield -

Sisters who grew up eating family meals and made family meals a priority while raising their families.

Carolyn is an educator and children’s author.
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educator, author, and speaker.

They collaborated on this book during a trip to Oregon in 2009. In 2026, it was time to give it to the world.