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Benjamin Franklin Circles and  
The Family Dinner Project Toolkit

# Benjamin Franklin Circles and The Family Dinner Project Toolkit

## WELCOME!

In our increasingly digital world, many say that they find it harder than ever before to know their neighbors and feel connected to their community. In addition to serving as a space for individual self-improvement, Benjamin Franklin Circles have the power to bring communities together for meaningful, offline interactions to build community and better our world.

The Family Dinner Project is a growing movement all about food, fun and conversation about things that matter. Studies show that the simple act of sharing a meal helps to build confident, caring and connected children and families. Friends, neighbors, and other communities can also find connection by sharing meals together. Through our Community Dinner Program, we support individuals and families as they learn from each other's challenges and successes. By participating in a community dinner, individual families feel inspired to jumpstart their own commitments to nightly dinners, as they feel part of something bigger than themselves.

Why not combine these two great initiatives, and bring communities together for meaningful, enjoyable interactions over food?

Below is a series of guidelines that combine our varied experiences. Just as every individual is different, every community is different, so use this as a guide to figure out what will work best for you and your members. These are not rules, but a framework. Make your club your own. And share what you have seen work best. We will all improve faster by learning from each other.





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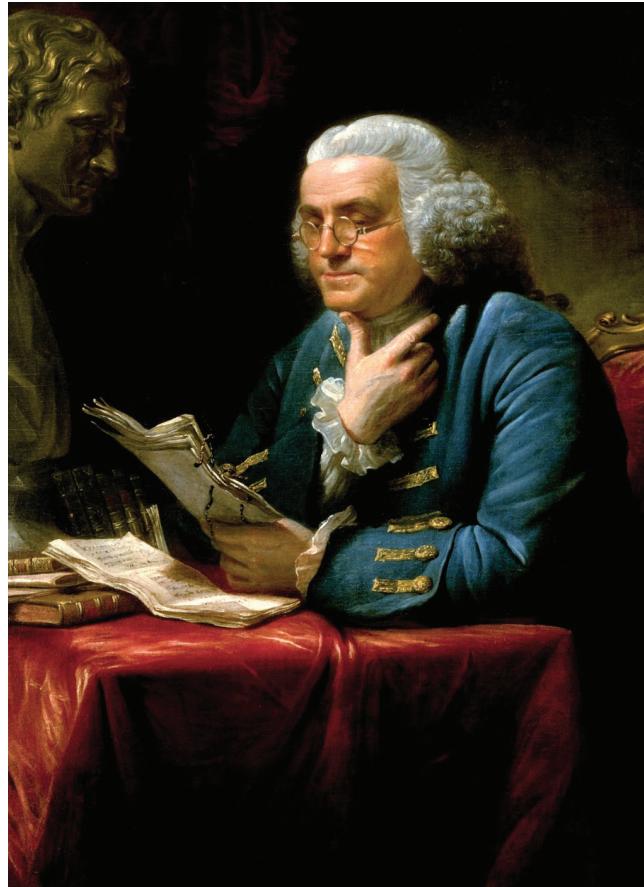
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## What are Benjamin Franklin Circles?

Benjamin Franklin, the godfather of self-improvement, created what he called a “Mutual Improvement Club” in 1727, which met every Friday for 40 years. The idea behind the club was to bring together individuals with diverse interests and skills to work towards improving themselves and their community.

The foundation of the club was 13 virtues: Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility, Chastity and Humility. In Franklin’s autobiography he included a framework and specific guidelines for how he created his club so that those who came after him could follow his example.

Almost 300 years later, [we are using Franklin's virtues](#) as a launching off point to re-imagine community engagement, leadership and values for the 21 st century , and examine how our interpretations of them can improve our lives and the world we live in.



## What is The Family Dinner Project?

The Family Dinner Project is a movement that champions family dinner as an opportunity for families and individuals to connect with each other through easy, healthy recipes, games to play at the table and ideas to spark meaningful conversation.

Years of scientific research document the many physical, mental health and academic benefits of family dinners. Research links regular family meals with the kinds of behaviors parents want for their children: healthier eating habits, of course, but also reduction of high-risk teenage behaviors such as drug use, binge-drinking and teen pregnancy, as well as lower rates of depression and anxiety. It's not just that mealtimes prevent high risk behaviors; they also promote positive ones like resilience and self-esteem, as well as providing key benefits to the brain. Having regular family dinner is a better predictor of



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high achievement than doing homework or playing sports. It's also just plain fun: teenagers consistently rank dinner with their families as one of their most enjoyed activities.

While this research is the “why” of family dinners, The Family Dinner Project is the “how.” Through our online resources and our work in communities, we help families unlock all of the many benefits of shared meals and make them their own.

### **Benjamin Franklin Circles and FDP Community Dinners are:**

- Recurring
- Face-to-face
- Events that bring communities together
- Free

### **Our goals are to:**

- Encourage civic engagement
- Spark deep conversations around big questions
- Inspire a sense of purpose in improving our community and ourselves
- Form deep connections among the group and beyond
- Build habits that individuals will bring home to their families and that will last a lifetime

### **Benjamin Franklin Dinner Circles Format**

Our Benjamin Franklin Circle meets monthly to focus on one of Franklin’s 13 virtues (outlined below). Each meeting is two hours long, and is divided into three sections: “appetizer,” “entrée” and “dessert.”

Sharing food while sharing conversation deepens the connections club members might otherwise make. Participants have the opportunity to learn more about one another through sharing recipes and stories; they’re able to learn from one another as Circle members share cooking tips and techniques; and they’re unified in their experiences through the multi-sensory exploration and enjoyment that come naturally through sharing a meal.

On the practical side, sharing food during meetings of the Circle can make attendance much more possible for some members, who might not otherwise have an opportunity to eat if not served a meal during the meeting.

We suggest that the group work together to establish a plan for food preparation each month. Some options include potluck, rotating responsibilities, and cooking together.



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## Appetizer:

We spend the first 40 minutes with an appetizer: diving into our experience of the previous month's virtue, while sharing some light food together. Some easy, fun appetizer ideas include [hummus](#) and pita, cheese and crackers, guacamole and chips, vegetables and [dip](#).

## Entrée:

During the second 40 minutes we connect over an entrée. In an effort to save time for discussion, we advise preparing this course ahead of time, but serving it "family style"

– inviting individuals to pass around bowls of different elements (a salad, a starch, a protein) and serving one another. During this time, we discuss how Franklin defined the next month's virtue and how we plan on committing to it. Members choose a commitment that is specific, realistic and measurable so that they can track whether they improved in their practice for each month. When the group meets monthly every member will have an opportunity to share his or her experience.

Following Franklin's model, the meetings will each focus on one of Franklin's 13 virtues, as defined by Franklin himself:

- **Temperance:** Eat not to dullness. Drink not to elevation.
- **Silence:** Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversation.
- **Order:** Let all your things have their places. Let each part of your business have its time.
- **Resolution:** Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve.
- **Frugality:** Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
- **Industry:** Lose no time. Be always employed in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary actions.
- **Sincerity:** Use no hurtful deceit. Think innocently and justly; and if you speak, speak accordingly.
- **Justice:** Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.





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- **Moderation:** Avoid extremes. Forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
- **Cleanliness:** Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, clothes or habitation.
- **Tranquility:** Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or avoidable.
- **Chastity:** Rarely use venery but for health or offspring; never to dullness, weakness, or to the injury to your own or another's peace or reputation.
- **Humility:** Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

#### **Discussion topics include:**

- How can this virtue be interpreted for our modern lives?
- How can we extrapolate from what we've learned in a way that is applicable to our local and global community?
- How can we, or our larger networks, collaborate and apply learnings to promote the common good?

#### **Dessert:**

The final 40 minutes of the group are devoted to dessert. This course could be as simple as coffee or fruit, or something more involved like a cheese course, a cake or a pie. Let the tastes of the group determine the plans, and vary the menu from one month to another.

These final 40 minutes are focused on a set of questions that Franklin and his cohort asked one another at each meeting:

- What is something you're looking for help on? Something you're struggling with?
- Is there anyone in the group starting a new business or venture (or project)?
- How can we help you? Even if it's just to "like" you on Facebook or retweet you, we want to leverage the power of this network.
- Do you know of anyone who is not here who deserves praise? (We interpret this to mean: Is there anyone we know doing innovative things that others in this group should know about.)
- Is there any man whose friendship we want? (We interpret this question to mean: How could we leverage our network to help each other, man or woman?)
- Is there any advice we can give each other about our work/personal life?
- Do you know of any deserving young beginner lately set up, whom it lies in the power of the club in any way to encourage? (We interpret this to mean: Do you know anyone we can help/mentor, i.e., paying it forward?)
- Do you see anything amiss in the present customs or proceedings of the club, which might be amended? (We interpret this to mean: How can this group continue to improve?)



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## How do I launch my own Benjamin Franklin Dinner Circle?

There are many ways to launch a successful circle, so we encourage you to experiment. Try creating your own set of thirteen virtues. Gratitude, acceptance of difference, empathy? Let the virtues help to determine the menu; for example, when discussing frugality, your menu could be made up entirely of items already in your pantry, or by reusing leftovers.

Try asking a different set of questions. For example, how do your dinner habits impact your other habits? What are ways that you want to teach or model this virtue in your family? Are there social forces at work that are interfering with your children learning this virtue, and how might you counteract those forces? If we were to discuss this virtue in a different community, might there be differences based on culture, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age or class? Meet weekly instead of monthly. There is no one way to launch a Benjamin Franklin Dinner Circle. As long as members are improving you are doing it the right way!

Here are some steps to get you started:

- **Announce you are starting a circle:** Send an email out to those in your network who may be interested in joining or post an announcement on your social media channels like Twitter and Facebook. You can also create a group on [Meetup](#) or, if you prefer to go the non-digital route, post an announcement on the bulletin board at your local café.
- **Find a location:** This is your first goal. You can meet in someone's living room or a community center, library or café. Somewhere quiet is preferable. We have found it works best if you can stick to the same space for each meeting.
- **Welcome:** Once you know who will be joining your circle and where it will be held, send a welcome letter to all new members [sharing](#) the one-page history and background document we created, which includes descriptions of the virtues and the questions that you will be asking at each meeting, and outlining why you have decided to launch your own circle. This letter should also clarify the commitment you expect from each member and include a short bio for each of the members. Feel free to create your own letter or use the template we created and edit for your own needs. We think groups of 8-12 work best because it keeps the group intimate and the conversation flowing.





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- **Pick a date:** Send out a calendar invite by email. Include the virtue you will be focused on for that month and the set of questions in the invitation so all members can be prepared prior to arriving for the meeting. We sent out all 13 calendar invites when we launched our circle.
- **Potluck by course:** Ask everyone to bring food or drink to share with the group.
- **Don't go it alone:** Co-leaders are recommended to help share the responsibility.

## How should I structure our first meeting?

- **Introductions:** The night of the first circle meeting spend the initial 40 minutes introducing everyone. We like to ask everyone to share their name, what they do or what they're passionate about, and one fun fact about themselves. Feel free to use any icebreaker that gets everyone in the room sharing.
- **Set the structure:** Briefly discuss why Franklin decided to launch his Benjamin Franklin Circle and the 13 virtues that form the foundation of the circle. We decided to stick to Franklin's virtues, but other groups may choose to create their own.
- **Set expectations:** It's important that what everyone shares remains confidential and that everyone is committed to attending all meetings and respecting each other's contributions. Create your own ground rules.
- **Pick a date and time:** When will you hold your meetings? Days? Nights? Weekends? We have found that picking a certain day of the month (the first Tuesday of each month, for example) and sticking to it works best. We are also consistent about the time to avoid any confusion (we meet from 6-8pm each month). Choosing the dates for each meeting way in advance is also important to avoid scheduling conflicts.
- **Discuss the format:** We meet monthly for two hours at a time and split each meeting up into 40-minute segments. The first 40 minutes we talk about the previous month's virtue. The second 40 minutes we discuss the virtue for the following month and how we will commit to it. And the last 40 minutes we ask a set of questions that Franklin and his cohort asked each other.
- **Listen, connect the dots and ask questions:** We use Stanford University Institute of Design's empathy interview format. We ask a lot of "why" questions even when we think we know why someone said something. We encourage stories. We pay attention





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to nonverbal cues. And we ask questions neutrally.

- **Save time at the end:** Leave 15 minutes at the end of the group for housekeeping. When will the next meeting be? Where? Anyone have any questions or concerns? What did the group like? Dislike?
- **Create a digital way for members to stay in touch in between groups:** Some groups prefer email for all communications. Others use a text message thread to send updates or create a Google group. We have found that a WhatsApp thread works best because there are no emails to get lost in your inbox.
- **Accountability partners:** Ask your group whether they would like to pair up with a partner to help keep them on track throughout the month. Some people work better if they have someone to check in with regularly. They can always communicate with the larger group, but some people feel more comfortable sharing one-on-one.
- **Repeat:** Meet again next month (or week)!

## You would make a great Benjamin Franklin Circle leader if:

- You are looking for a community with which to set goals, provide feedback and accountability, and grow.
- You want to have a space to think deeply about life's big questions.
- You believe change and growth is possible and you want to invite others to join you.
- You believe in actively creating the community you want to see in the world and that by doing so you are inspiring yourself and others to be great leaders.
- You are committed to seeing the circle through to its natural ending. That may be 13 months or 13 weeks, or whatever is best for you and your group.

## Ground rules:

- Everything shared in meetings is completely confidential.
- Don't judge others, but feel free to ask them why they chose a certain commitment and if they are pushing themselves far enough in their goals. There is a fine line between being critical and being helpful, so when in doubt respect each member's understanding of what he or she needs at that moment.
- Joining a Benjamin Franklin Circle is a commitment. You are committing not only to yourself but to the others in your group. Attendance at the meetings is critical.

## Don't forget:

- **Document your meetings:** Photos and short videos are good for sharing on your blog and social media (if everyone is open to it). Let us know about any content you have and we would be happy to share on our own social channels. Ask if anyone in the



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group would be willing to write a short blog post about what they learned from the meeting or something they learned about themselves from joining the group. Feel free to use the hashtag #benfranklincircles and tag us on Facebook and Twitter:

[www.facebook.com/benfranklincircles/](http://www.facebook.com/benfranklincircles/)

[www.facebook.com/thefamilydinnerproject/](http://www.facebook.com/thefamilydinnerproject/)

@BFCircles

@FDP\_Tweets

- **Participate:** Benjamin Franklin Circle leaders are participants too. Share your story and point out patterns you see between members' stories.
- **Deep dive:** Look for opportunities to connect the dots and go deeper.
- **Take notes:** We have found it helpful to send a short wrap-up email with members' commitments and any ideas for books, films or other tips and tools that members shared with the group after the meeting. Assigning a different note taker at each meeting can help make members feel more personally involved. You don't have to do everything. Delegate!