



Meal Planning Made Easy

By Angela Esnouf
Creating Order from Chaos



Angela Esnouf, from *Creating Order from Chaos*, helps families create order and hoarders break free from clutter. Angela believes getting organised can be pain-free, and even fun!

Angela is a Past President and Expert accredited member of AAPO (Australasian Association of Professional Organisers). She is also a subscriber of ICD (Institute for Challenging Disorganization), with Level II Specialist Certificates in Chronic Disorganization and Hoarding, and Certificates of Study in Basic ADD Issues with the CD Client, CD Client Administration and Learning Modalities and Styles, and is also a Golden Circle member of NAPO (National Association of Professional Organizers).

This e-book is intended to make your life easier. I hope it has you inspired in the kitchen again.

Why plan meals?

Meal planning saves time, money and effort. And you'll be less stressed.

30 minutes spent planning meals for the coming week will more than repay your efforts.

- No more multiple trips to buy ingredients
- No more unexpected surprises, leaving you high and dry
- No more resorting to take away food to fill the gaps
- No more wandering the supermarket aisles aimlessly

How does it look now?

Who is currently the main cook?

Who is currently the main shopper?

Who else gets involved?

What do they do?

Who else **could** get involved?

What sort of things could they do? (more on this later)

How will it look?

What do you want out of a meal plan?

- Easy to prepare meals?
- Quick meals?
- Budget-friendly meals?
- Tasty meals?
- Meals to suit a fussy eater?
- Something everyone will eat?
- Healthy meals?
- Limited ingredients?
- Impressive gourmet meals?
- Special dietary needs?
- Something else? _____

Your Top 3 considerations –

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What factors do you currently take into account when planning meals and shopping?

- What's in season
- What's on special
- Familiar recipes
- New recipes to try
- What's already in the pantry/fridge/freezer
- Likes & dislikes
- Something else? _____

What You'll Need

- A calendar
- A magnetic notepad
- Strategies
- Recipes
- Ideas
- Co-operation
- The 7 Questions

The 7 Questions

for successful meal planning are

1. Who will be home to eat?
2. Who will be home to cook and/or help?
3. What do they like to eat?
4. What's already on hand?
5. What's doable?
6. What's in season?
7. What's on special?

Questions #1 and #2: Who will be home to eat, cook and help?

Busy families often have activities which impact on dinner time. Start with taking these into account, using a family calendar.

Set up a simple way to record these, keep it handy for last minute changes and so everyone can see what's going on. Empowering family members to update that information will promote active communication and make planning easier.

You could use a standard calendar or create a table of your own.

Let's introduce our Test Family and their schedule:

	Dad	Mum	Jenny	David
Monday		Committee meeting 7.30	Ballet lessons 4pm	
Tuesday				Soccer practice 5.30
Wednesday	Squash 8pm			
Thursday				Put rubbish bins out
Friday	Dinner with friends 7pm	Dinner with friends 7pm		
Saturday			Sleepover at friends	Play soccer 10am
Sunday	Nanna's birthday lunch	Nanna's birthday lunch	Nanna's birthday lunch	Nanna's birthday lunch

Now let's take a closer look.

- Dad Test works 5 days a week and gets home regularly at 6.30. Tuesdays he collects David from soccer practice. He's not much of a cook but can follow instructions and loves to barbecue.
- Mum Test works 3 days a week (Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday till 5pm) and volunteers as well. She does the shopping, meal planning and most of the cooking.
- Jenny Test is 13 years old and is busy with ballet, school and her social life.
- David Test is 11 years old. He's very active and often hungry. He likes to spend time with his Dad.
- The garbage collection is on Friday morning.

What picture can you draw of your own family and their schedule?

See page 29 for a blank family calendar you can print, laminate and use.

Now a word about helping. Getting meals on the table takes more than just buying ingredients and cooking them. Here are some things you might consider delegating.

- Planning
- Writing the shopping list
- Shopping
- Unpacking shopping
- Food delivery
- Preparing ingredients ready to cook
- Chopping, slicing, washing ingredients
- Buttering bread
- Cooking all the components
- Setting the table
- Feeding young ones
- Clearing the table
- Washing dishes
- Drying dishes
- Stacking dishwasher
- Unpacking dishwasher

The hour after getting home from a busy day at work or school can be hectic. These days it's common to have activities booked for after dinner as well, which makes time scarce. Preparing a healthy meal sometimes seems just too hard. Besides the list above, there are other things you could delegate to allow more time for preparing the meals.

- Feeding pets
- Taking washing off the line
- Unpacking school bags
- Starting a load of washing
- Homework supervision
- Preparing for the next activity

Question #3: What do they like to eat?

Here's what else we know about the Test Family...

- Dad Test enjoys eating all types of food, except eggplant and cabbage.
- Mum's conscious about her weight and her family's health, as well as the budget.
- Jane likes most foods, except for anything spicy. She likes to bake and will occasionally help with the cooking when asked.
- David dislikes most cooked vegetables, but will tolerate carrots, peas, pumpkin and potato. He prefers raw vegetables and quite likes spicy food.

Who likes what in your house? More importantly, who dislikes what?

Ask each family member to write down their 5 favourite foods, and their least favourite 5. Yes, only 5. Use this list to help you make your meal planning decisions.

The story so far

Let's look at what all this means for our Test Family...

- Monday is when Mum does the shopping. Jenny needs collecting at 5pm and Mum has to leave for her meeting at 7pm. Mum and Jenny can cook together after ballet. The family can eat together when Dad gets home at 6.30.
- Tuesday Mum gets home from work just in time to take David to soccer practice. Dad and David arrive home at 7pm, and David is very hungry.
- Wednesday is another busy day at work for Mum. Dad wants a light meal so he can play squash well.
- Thursday is a night home for everyone and they enjoy eating together. It's also when they most often eat fish, as the rubbish is collected the next day. They don't want nasty smells.
- Friday Mum and Dad are going out, and the children will stay home with a babysitter. The sitter arrives at 6.30 and will need feeding as well.
- With Jenny out, Saturday night is their chance to eat a spicy meal.
- Sunday the Test Family is hosting a birthday lunch for Nanna. There will be a total of 14 family members in attendance, 7 adults and 7 children.

Question #4: What's already on hand?

You can save time, money and effort by shopping at home first.

Take a look at what's already in the pantry, fridge, freezer and fruit bowl. You'll see which stocks are running low, but also what's already available to you. There may be whole meals you can create or individual ingredients you can use.

There may be ingredients that need using up, nearing their expiry date. Include these in your next week's planning.

Be sure to toss any that have passed their expiry date. If they're staple essentials, add them to the shopping list.

Keep a magnetic notepad on the fridge door as a shopping list. Add items as they run out, and expect the same from all the family. Even little ones can help with this, using pictures or trying at spelling. Tell them, "if it's not on the list, it's not in the shopping trolley". Sharing that responsibility means you can happily relinquish the role of mind-reader.

Question #5: What's doable?

Know your time limits and level of skill. Stick with what you can achieve easily, especially at first. Over-reaching may end in frustration.

Keep it simple and gradually build up to more complicated meals and expectations.

Shopping online can be a time-saver. Delivery times are flexible. At first it will take longer getting to know the ordering system and the products available. Over time, regular purchases can be marked as favourites and the process may become quicker. One downside to shopping online is that there's no guarantee your preferences will be available. You may not know until delivery that a key ingredient is unavailable. Some of the online shopping sites are

www.colesonline.com.au

www.homeshop.com.au

www.organicfood.com.au

There are several shopping apps for smartphones that make life, meal planning and shopping extra easy as well.

Another option is to order a mixed box of fresh produce home-delivered. The supplier chooses a variety of products, dependant on availability at the market, and delivers on a set day and time each week. A couple of these services are

www.organicangels.com

www.aussiefarmers.com.au

Question #6: What's in season?

Seasonality is directly linked to quality, freshness and price. Melbourne Markets has produced a series of guides to help you figure out what's in season when, and how to use those seasonal products. It can be downloaded from www.marketfresh.com.au

Buying seasonal foods is also better for the environment. They usually require less time in storage and transportation.

Question #7: What's on special?

The big supermarkets all have specials catalogues. If you prefer not to receive junk mail, these can also be viewed online at

www.catalog.coles.com.au

www.woolworths.com.au

www.aldi.com.au

www.iga.net.au/igafresh

Strategy #1: Stress-Free Shopping Rules

- Never shop on an empty stomach
- Always shop with a list
- Never shop with stressed or tired children
- If you take children shopping, involve them by assigning “jobs”. This can range from actually using their busy hands, legs and minds to asking them to “look out for the number 3”
- Become familiar and save time by shopping at the same place

Strategy #2: Facing Fussy Eaters

Fussy eaters are a fact of life. But fussy eaters usually become less fussy as they mature. Someone who won't eat broccoli at the age of 4 may well love it as an adult.

Remember Dad Test? He doesn't like eggplant or cabbage. Are there other vegetables he can eat and enjoy? Sure. He's allowed to have his favourites. Children are no different.

Fussy eaters will usually like something from each food group, even if it's one thing only. Battles at meal times are unproductive and unharmonious. They lead to stress and resentment for all parties, and could lead to negative attitudes towards eating altogether.

Try this instead

- Always include one thing a fussy eater likes in each meal
- Offer limited choice – i.e. 5 pizza toppings, from which they must choose 2
- Introduce new tastes gradually
- Embrace peer pressure – invite friends who eat anything over for meals
- Inject fun into meals – go on a picnic, present food attractively
- Involve them in meal planning and preparation
- Either cut pieces large so a fussy eater can remove what they don't like, OR so small that food is disguised (like, pureed soup)
- Enforce the “one bite rule” – it's a requirement that everyone at the table tries at least one bite from everything on their plate
- Employ a democratic attitude and ask each family member to choose one meal for the week. Everyone gets to eat a favourite, but they must also eat everyone else's choices, without complaint
- Never get drawn into an argument about food – quietly remove the meal. If they are still hungry later, re-present the meal
- Remove the label “Fussy Eater”. Telling someone they're a fussy eater will only embed that identity

Strategy #3: Be Prepared

In family life, things don't always go according to plan. At times like these, you need something on hand which is quick and easy to prepare. Reaching for the phone to order pizza costs time and money.

In addition to your planned meals, I recommend buying one complete meal which can be a standby for unplanned emergencies.

Some ideas

- Eggs for omelettes/scrambled eggs/boiled eggs
- Frozen meals
- Tinned soups
- Fresh filled pasta & sauce
- Baked potatoes with baked beans
- Ham steaks
- Your ideas? _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Strategy #4: Be Flexible

There are some ingredients which lend themselves to different dishes and different styles of cooking. These are great to have on hand for mix and match meals on the run.

- Tinned or fresh tomatoes
- Bacon
- Pasta
- Rice
- Tinned tuna
- Eggs
- Potatoes
- Minced beef
- Onions
- Chicken & Beef stock

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Strategy #5: Cook Today for Tomorrow

When preparing meals, many parts can be done ahead of time. This is especially useful for saving time and effort.

- Make double quantity mashed potato today for tomorrow's Shepherd's Pie
- Slice extra carrot sticks when preparing vegies today for tomorrow's snack
- Slice the steak for both today's stir-fry and tomorrow's beef stew
- Boil double quantity of pasta today for tomorrow's pasta bake
- Roast 2 chickens, one for today, one for tomorrow's Chop Suey or Chicken & Vegetable Pies
- Make and freeze double quantities of stews, casseroles, soups, pasta sauce, muffins, crumble topping, stewed fruit today for tomorrow
- Chop or process in a blender, then freeze, entire bunches of herbs today for adding to meals tomorrow
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Strategy #6: Use Kitchen Appliances

Some appliances are Unitaskers, like doughnut makers. They can only be used to make one kind of thing. Some appliances are Multitaskers, like microwave ovens. They can be used over and over again for many different things. How much space, time, effort and money are you devoting to Unitaskers? Commonly, Unitaskers take up more space than their “task” is worth.

Here are some appliances which have earned their place in my kitchen

- Slow cooker
- Barbecue
- Microwave oven
- Stove
- Oven
- Mixer
- Sandwich press
- Food processor
- Pie maker

Which appliances are worth your space, time, effort and money?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

No-Fail, Quick, Tried and True, Easy Meals

Baked Potatoes

Got an hour? Bake them in the oven, pierced with a metal skewer to conduct heat to the centre.

Got 10 minutes? Bake them in the microwave instead.

Top with

- Baked beans
- Bacon
- Onion
- Sour cream
- Salsa
- Grated cheese
- Chives
- Coleslaw
- Bolognaise sauce
- Tuna mornay
- Corn
- Ratatouille

Guilt-free Chips

Cut 4 large potatoes into wedges or thick slices. Microwave in oven bag on High for 5 minutes. Drain well. Spread out on oven tray. Spray with oil. Bake at 230°C till crisp.

Tuna Patties

1 large tin tuna in spring water, drained and flaked
 2 tbs chopped parsley
 5 spring onions, finely chopped
 salt & pepper to taste
 ½ cup light evaporated milk, or ½ cup natural yoghurt
 4 large potatoes, peeled

Boil potatoes until just tender, drain and mash. Mix together with the remaining ingredients. With floured hands, shape into patties. Saute patties in a little oil. Serves 4.

Slow-Cooked Beef Casserole (quantity for 6 litre Slow Cooker)

1.2kg Blade Steak or similar, diced
 1-2 onions, roughly chopped

Brown beef and onion in small amount oil. Add to slow cooker. Add any combination of vegetables to almost fill the slow cooker.

- Potatoes
- Carrots
- Zucchini
- Mushrooms
- Capsicum
- Peas
- Corn
- Eggplant
- Swede
- Parsnip
- Broccoli
- Sweet potato

Add 2 packets of French Onion powdered soup and 2 tins of crushed tomatoes or equivalent pasta sauce. Stir to mix. Cook on high for 7-9 hours.

Homemade Souvlakis

540g of lamb, beef or chicken, diced
1 clove of garlic, crushed
juice of 1 lemon
2 tomatoes, cubed
8 lettuce leaves, washed and shredded
1 salad onion, sliced thinly
8 large mountain or pita breads
4 tbs natural low-fat yoghurt or low-fat tzatziki
salt and pepper to taste

Marinate meat in garlic and lemon juice for at least 30 minutes. Spray frypan with cooking spray and heat over medium heat. Cook chicken in two batches. Warm bread in microwave oven. Serve meat on bread with salad and tzatziki and wrap. Serves 4.

Hamburgers

Cook home-made or frozen hamburger patties. Toast or grill hamburger buns. Add

- Sliced tomato
- Beetroot
- Pineapple
- Avocado
- Sauce
- Lettuce
- Cheese
- Onion
- Cucumber

Easy Pizza

Top large pita breads with tomato paste or pasta sauce. Top with your favourite pizza toppings. Cook in moderate oven 15-20 minutes.

More Ideas

- Grilled Trout
- Salmon Steaks on Sweet Potato Mash with Green Beans
- Tuna Mornay & bagged Salad
- Store-bought BBQ Chicken & Salad
- Barbecued Mussels
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

More Meal Ideas

When you're stuck there are some great online resources –

www.kidspot.com.au/baby-kids-children-family-easy-food-recipes.asp

<http://www.weightwatchers.com.au/food/index.aspx>

www.masterfoods.com.au

Some websites even help you create a meal plan

www.mealopedia.com offers a random weekly menu and lets you save previous menus

Tell www.supercook.com what ingredients you have on hand and it will help you find suitable recipes

www.taste.com.au has any number of advanced search combinations, and has the added advantage of being an Australian site, increasing its relevance

More places to find great Quick & Easy Recipes

- Your friends
- Magazines
- TV
- Cookbooks
- Supermarket catalogues

Put It All Together

So now you know the answers to the 7 Questions. You have your tools, strategies, ideas and co-operation. It's time to put it all together in your own plan.

Week Commencing	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Family Timetable				
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				



Week Commencing	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Good luck with your meal planning adventures. If you have any questions, send them to angela@creatingorder.com.au. If you have a success story you'd like to share, we'd love to hear them as well.

Your success will inspire others.