



Sharing food is giving love!

A Meal Train is a sign up schedule for friends and family to bring meals to the family of a newborn. It is a way for a community to participate in this special time while providing practical support.

This guide is included in my Build Your Nest postpartum planning workbook and also is available for free on my website. If you have downloaded it, I recommend printing it so that you can mark it up with your own ideas, circles and stars.

The guide gives you 3 steps:

1. **MEET WITH THE PARENTS:** figure out what the family needs and wants
2. **CREATE THE CIRCLE:** get their friends and family on board
3. **ACTIVATE AND KEEP IT COMING:** get the schedule filled up and be a liaison

This same format can also be used to organize play times for older siblings -another great way to support the family of a newborn.

Please do not plan your own Meal Train!

The family of a newborn absolutely deserves to be cared for in this way. Coordinating the Meal Train is a gift to be given to a family. The role of the coordinator is to be a liaison for the family and their community. It is so much easier for a friend to say “these guys need more food, bring it on”.

Something to keep in mind as you are setting up a Meal Train is that each family has a unique circle of friends and family that surround them. Some communities are familiar with Meal Trains and will quickly fill up the sign up sheet. Other communities may be unfamiliar with the Meal Train and also unaware of the needs of families with newborns. The job of the coordinator is to be creative and responsive to the specific community at hand. There are many ways to go about setting up a successful Meal Train.

*I have written this with families of newborns in mind, but Meal Trains are also very helpful for people recovering from surgery or injury, healing from a major illness, or facing the loss of a loved one. It is a powerful way of supporting friends through life’s many transitions.



Step 1: MEET WITH THE PARENTS

Be ready to take notes because from this you will write up the “cook’s instructions,” which will be put in the notes on the website and can be emailed to people as well.

Before you begin gathering information from your friend, take a moment to let her know that she deserves the support. That sharing food is a beautiful act of community and people want to help. And that this is not just about supporting them when and if they are really struggling, it is also about giving them a chance to feel relaxed and joyful with their newborn.

Encourage her to get really specific about what her family needs and wants. And let her know that if her needs change, you are there to relay the message to her community.

Food: Ask your friends for their family’s food allergies, sensitivities, and preferences. From this you can come up with a list of “No foods” and a list of “Yes foods,” and even a list of “go light foods”. It can also include general guidelines, such as “organic” or “no preservatives” or “nutrient dense”. What are some of her favorite dishes? What does she have a hard time digesting? Really, encourage her to be completely honest with this: people want to bring food that she and her family will like and can eat! She can also add easy options for people such as restaurants or deli’s she would like take out from and the specific menu choices that she prefers. There are also dinner delivery services -go with the small, local companies.

Something else to discuss with her is common foods that postpartum women avoid. Postpartum food avoidance is cross-cultural, though the foods that are avoided are not. Some commonly avoided foods are beans, onions, garlic, spicy foods, kale, broccoli, citrus, cold foods, chocolate, and caffeine. Some food avoidance is about how the foods affect the baby through the breast milk and others are about the mother’s health. If a mother has a hard time with a specific food, it is likely her baby will too.

In planning a postpartum diet parents can look to the traditions of their families as well as the broader wisdom of their cultures of origin. Traditional systems of medicine have specific dietary protocols and dishes for the postpartum time and this some of this knowledge can be found in books, such as the First Forty days by Heng Ou.

These include potent herbal formulas, specific traditional dishes, and a nuanced approach to clearing and warming the uterus. For the sake of brevity, what follows is a much simplified explanation. Central to these practices is the belief that food is a powerful way to balance and restore a postpartum persons’s body. Foods are seen as warming, cooling, or neutral based on their principles and affects within the body. Some warming foods include ginger, onions, chicken and squash. Cooling foods are cucumber, lettuce, tofu, and peppermint tea. Postpartum women are especially discouraged from eating frozen, cold, or even raw foods. Broths and well cooked soups are common and are good examples of easily digestible foods -another important principle.



BYN Meal Train Guide



VISITORS: It is so important to set clear boundaries, based on what your friend is wanting. Bringing a meal is not necessarily an invitation to visit. Encourage her not to feel obligated to visit, let people hold the baby or even say hi. This allows her to receive meals from whomever would like to bring food, not just the small circle of people she wants to visit with. Maybe she is private and would like a note on the front door saying “Thank you for the meal. The mother and baby are resting and aren’t available for visiting”. It can be added that if people are coming in to the house, they need to wash their hands, and if they or someone in their household is sick to cancel the meal delivery. Also you can point out to your friend that she has access to the on line sign up so that she can see who is coming when.

TIMELINE: A good Meal Train can go for a month or even two months. The on line schedule will allow you to choose a span of time and then to go in and take out specific dates. So if a Grandma will be visiting for 10 days during the baby’s first month, simply take those dates out -but only if Grandma has specifically agreed to cooking! Maybe the family wants meals for a month solid and then 4 days a week for the second month. Or maybe the meals increase when her partner goes back to work. If unexpected challenges arise with recovery or the baby, add on more time. Encourage your friend to really receive the help, that sharing food is beautiful and what friends are for. She will have plenty of time to share food with others in the future.

DROP OFF: This should include address, time frame (example: 4-6 pm), and where exactly to put the meal. Sometimes a hot meal is left on the door step or the cooks come in for a visit. It can also be delivered cold and put in a cooler on the front porch -this allows for delivery any time of day. If your friend lives in the country, another option is to have a cooler at a drop off site which will then be picked up by a partner or neighbor and delivered later.

CONTAINERS: It is important to give specific directions with this, so that the receiving family doesn’t end up with extra work. Here are some options: deliver food in containers that do not need to be returned -yogurt containers or mason jars. For containers that do need to be returned such as bowls and pots, the name of the family can be taped to the bottom and then the container can be left on the front or back porch to be picked up later.

PEOPLE: Ask your friend for the email addresses or phone numbers of her friends and family she knows will want to sign up. You can also ask her for the key people in her circles of friends. Her circles of friends may include her work, her partner’s work, church, neighbors, volunteer groups, kids’ schools etc.

CREATING THE CIRCLE: Discuss Step two with her.



Step 2: CREATE THE CIRCLE

Initially, it is good to send out an email to the first list of people your friend gives you, let them know what you are up to and give them permission to share this with others. To gather more emails you can contact the key people from your friends' circles and ask them if they can spread the word further. This can also be done later.

Sometimes, it is enough to simply send out a short email to the circle of friends announcing your plan to have a Meal Train for this family. Let them know that you will send out an email when the baby is born. Some circles of friends will jump for the chance to bring a meal and fully understand what it is all about. Other people will need more explanation and encouragement. Maybe they don't do very much home cooking or don't know what a meal Train is or even understand why the family of a newborn would find it so helpful. Here are some ideas about how to stir up excitement about the Meal Train.

At the baby shower or mama blessing:

- Pass around an email sign up on a clip board.
- Give the gift of to go containers or casserole dishes with lids with a card saying "Meal Train."
- Pass out a little card with the sign up site and passwords, with an explanation of the Meal Train.
- Collect frozen dishes at the gathering.

Online:

- Set up a facebook page "The Owen Family Meal Train" and post photos of the baby and updates about the family.
- Set up a Pinterest board "the Owen Family Cook Book" for recipes that will work for the family and give everyone pinning power.



Step 3: ACTIVATE AND KEEP IT COMING

Set up the online schedule:

How you need to set up the on line sign up sheet. There are many on line websites for organizing a Meal Train. Choose a site that does not require participants to create an account and sign in. They should only need to give the family's name and password. www.takethemameal.com is what I use, www.mealtrain.com is also good. Once you set up your own account, then set up the family's schedule. Put in the dates and add your cooks instructions to the notes. Setting this up can come before the baby is born and then just adjust the dates as needed.

First email:

The baby is born! Time to activate the Meal Train!

Now is the time to tell folks to start cooking! This can be an email sent BCC to the whole group, announcing the baby's birth and giving all the specifics of the Meal Train and giving the link and password to the on line schedule. Tell people to sign up well in advance, marking down what they will be cooking. The family will be able to see the schedule and it can be helpful for them to see it filled in at least a week or two in advance. People can sign up once or they can sign up once a week for a number of weeks. You can let people know they can simply double their recipe and cook for their own family at the same time, and that simple cooking is appreciated. Even though you have put the cook's notes on the site, go ahead and put them in this email as well.

Follow up emails:

As the coordinator it is your job to check the schedule to make sure it is filling up. You also need to check back with the family to see if any changes are needed or if there is other information that they would like relayed. With follow up emails you can share news about the family (that they wish to share of course), or maybe a photo of the baby. Also include any updates to the cook's instructions. This could be foods she's craving or anything that is not working. And if the schedule is looking empty ask people to sign up again.

When the Meal Train is all finished up, you can send a thank you email out to everyone who participated.



BYN Meal Train Guide



Coordinator's Notes ~for making the cook's instructions~

Family member names
Address
Phone number
Email
Yes Foods
No Foods
Go Light Foods
Take Out Meals
Time Line
Drop Off
Containers
Visitors Instructions
Discussion about creating the circle



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