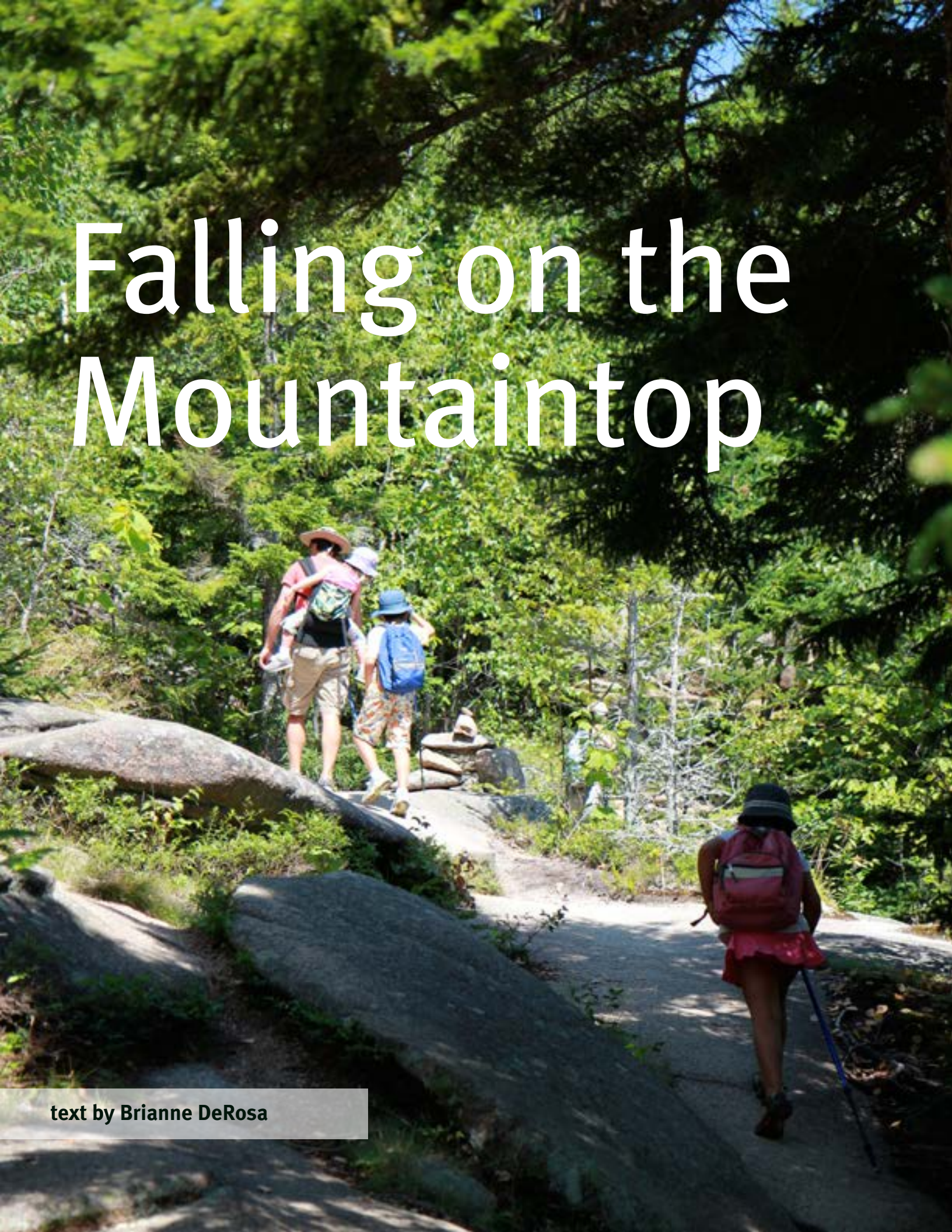


Falling on the Mountaintop

text by Brianne DeRosa



Setting realistic, achievable and purposeful goals for better family dinners

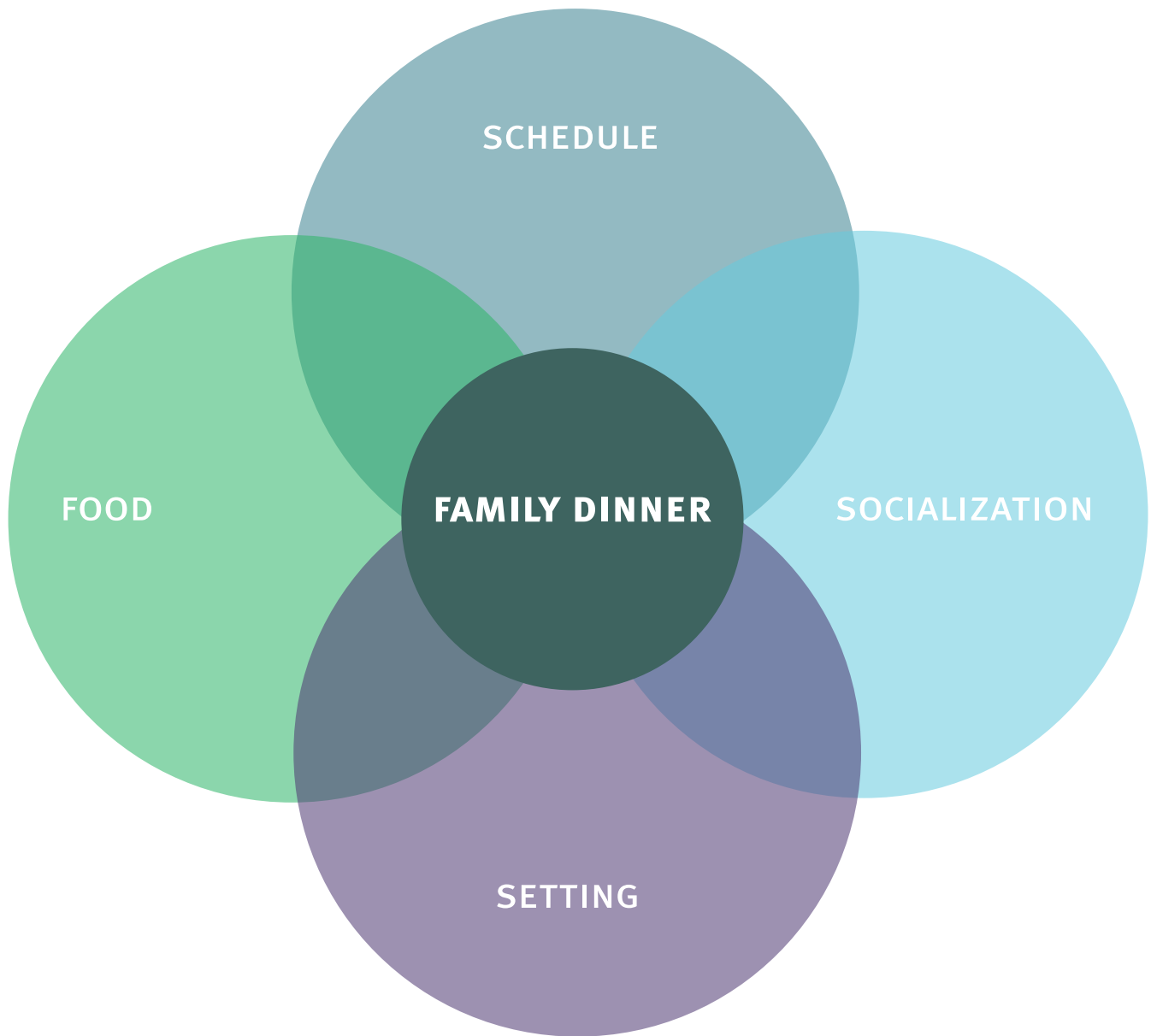
Too often, when family meals aren't working the way we want them to, I think we reach for what feels like the thing that's most in our control – the food. We obsess over what we're feeding ourselves and our kids, we read up on the latest research and trends, and we make goals that may or may not be attainable and sustainable.

For example, a mom fed up with hitting the drive-thru twice a week with her kids might spend all night on Pinterest gathering healthy slow-cooker recipes, and the next three weeks trying to implement her new crockpot dinner routine, only to realize slowly that the whole thing is falling apart around her because the soccer schedule is crazy, she never has the right ingredients at the right time, the kids are on hunger strike in protest of the new food... There could be a hundred reasons that send her back to the drive-thru, but in truth, the FOOD itself wasn't really the first thing that needed to be changed.

That's why I've created the Family Feeding Ecosystem. It's a way of looking at feeding your family that takes into account ALL the variables that need to be working well in order to have a relatively successful mealtime routine. Yes, the food is a big part of that, but it's so much more than just what you're eating. Laura, a client taking part in my one-to-one coaching service, is a great example of someone for whom the food — as in, WHAT to eat — isn't really the central issue at all.

Laura is a homeschooling mom of four kids, ranging in age from nearly two to eight years old, with another on the way. What's puzzling about her is that she seems to be doing everything “right” in terms of balancing her clearly demanding schedule and feeding her family well – she chooses almost exclusively whole food ingredients, cooks from scratch, limits sweets and refined grains, and serves up produce from her husband's backyard garden. That's right: Laura is Supermom. But when I got in touch with her, she was burned out, fed up, and feeling guilty. The stress of cooking, serving, and cleaning up meals and snacks for six people, five times a day, had her stretched so thin that the whole idea of family mealtime was becoming unpleasant – a source of anxiety, not a respite from the day. Clearly, that's not a routine that's working for everyone. (Remember the old saying, “If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy?” It goes double for family dinner.)

Together, Laura and I figured out that of the five areas in her ecosystem, three were out of balance – causing her to feel all the pressure she was experiencing. And in addition to a bona fide case of what I like to call “Internet Information Saturation Syndrome” and a desperate need for some off-duty time, Laura's family feeding routine was definitely suffering from food-based issues. The difference between Laura and most people I talk to, however, is that her problem wasn't mainly WHAT to feed her kids. It was what those choices meant for her sanity.



MOON LANDING

Your “Moon Landing” goal is the best, most idealized vision you can create for yourself. It’s a place you fantasize about being, but ultimately, it’s a place much like the moon — most of us probably won’t get there, and those who do can’t stay there forever.

MOUNTAINTOP

The “Mountaintop” is the goal you should more realistically shoot for. It’s still a place you want to be, but it’s more attainable. You can make plans to get there and set up base camps along the way. Nobody starts out at the summit, but with hard work, a good sherpa, and a cheering squad, it’s possible to get there — and if you’re lucky, you can even plant your flag, claim it, and find another mountain worth climbing!

TAKE ACTION!

What area can you work on to make your dream family dinner a reality?

Worksheet »

When Laura and I talked frankly about her situation, she couldn't quite figure out why she felt as if she was spending all her time in the kitchen. She wasn't making elaborate meals or trying to spend hours on a single item. But as I listened to her and tallied up her rough estimates, I discovered that somewhere around four full hours of her day were being spent on prep work, cooking, and supervising mealtimes – and that's all before the cleanup! With four kids ranging in age from toddlerhood to eight years, plus a pregnancy complicated by gestational diabetes to deal with, if I were in her shoes, I think I'd want to just spread out a tarp on the floor and throw some food in the middle of it. "It's like running a zoo," she confessed.

In Laura's ideal world, she'd like to have homeschooling and mealtimes work in harmony with one another, instead of competing for her time and attention. This is what I call the "Moon Landing" goal – the most idealized, picturesque version of family feeding you can possibly envision. In Laura's moon landing world, she'd take the kids to local farms and farmer's markets, have everyone behaving beautifully, get them all to learn about their food and where it comes from, bring home some produce, and cook it up together as part of the homeschool lesson. In reality, while she might be able to someday achieve that vision, it's not something she can get to right now if she plans to continue sleeping and showering; and even if she did manage it, unless she plans to actually purchase her own farm and run it (as if she needs something else to do!), it would be a special occasion, not a daily event.

We scaled her vision back to a manageable "Mountaintop" goal – something she can work towards and maybe even conquer and surpass someday. Rather than try to attain a goal of having homeschooling and food work seamlessly in tandem all the time, we set our sights on getting the kids more engaged with the food preparation, while reducing the amount of time Laura actually has to spend on cooking during the homeschool day.

Because taking time out of the kids' lessons to make lunch for everyone tends to stress Laura out and really exemplifies the tension between her two obligations (teach math right now? Or cook lunch?), I suggested that she eliminate lunch preparation during the day altogether. Schooling the kids at home doesn't have to mean giving up packed lunches; in fact, because Laura's kids often complain about having a one-size-fits-all menu for every one of their meals, letting each of the older boys help to pack his own lunch the night before will also relieve some of the stress of dealing with "I-don't-like-this" meltdowns. If everyone's lunches are packed and put away in the refrigerator before bedtime, then Laura will have more time for homeschooling during the day – and the kids will have more responsibility and ownership over their lunch routine.

Similarly, I wondered if Laura's mornings might be able to be streamlined with a quick nighttime prep. I suggested that she think about trying breakfasts in jars for the kids at least a few times a week, allowing them to fill kid-sized Mason jars with oatmeal, yogurt parfaits, or granola and fruit at night so everyone in the family would have a grab-and-go option to start the morning. The Mason jars would also help Laura minimize cleanup, a big win when you're trying to keep up with four active kids all day long.

The last item on the list was helping Laura get a handle on snack times. Her family eats two scheduled snacks each day; the morning snack is usually based around fresh fruit, while the afternoon tends to be a grab-and-go item that may be eaten in the car on the way to a swim lesson or sports practice. When I heard her express some guilt about not always having the time to make graham crackers from scratch for her already quite well-fed family, I knew that the afternoon snack was yet another moment in the day when Laura was grappling with trying to find a balance between her desire to feed her children healthful foods, and her need to manage all the other requirements of parenting, homeschooling, and household maintenance. In short, Laura's homemade graham crackers were a symptom of a highly overdeveloped sense of kitchen guilt.

Luckily, Laura has a mother's helper who comes to entertain her youngest children a few times a week. I suggested utilizing some of the mother's helper time to get afternoon snacks prepped and portioned. With good instructions and a smart mess containment strategy (outdoor "cooking" comes to mind!), the whole family's snacks could be made without Laura having to be involved at all. Plus, by removing her and the older boys from the picture, her toddler girls will be able to have more freedom to play and engage in food preparation without disrupting school time or having to share jobs and space with their more capable brothers. Letting them get involved in mixing up trail mixes, popping popcorn, portioning pretzels, or spreading peanut butter could help them to feel invested in the family's routine, while also setting the stage for them to join in with the lunch-packing and breakfast prep as they get older and build more skills.

With these three action steps in place – as well as a plan we devised to curb her Internet Information Saturation Syndrome, and a series of steps to take towards off-duty nights in preparation for the new baby – Laura will hopefully find a way to reclaim some time in her day, as well as her sanity, without sacrificing her nutrition ideals. I'll be checking back in with her to find out how things are going, and will write an update soon for StayBasic.

Brianne Kellogg DeRosa is blessed and cursed with the strong desire to try a little bit of everything in life. Among the things she's managed to get to so far are writing, singing, performing, educating, advocating, counseling, and of course, cooking. After earning an MFA in Theatre as a playwright and educator, Bri moved to Rhode Island, got married, started a family, and started meal planning. Bri blogs about food and family on Red, Round, or Green; contributed to the "Cooking With Trader Joe's: EasyLunchboxes" cookbook; is a regular writer for HandPicked Nation; is a proud member of the 2013 cast of Listen To Your Mother! Providence; and has blogged about parenting for Yahoo's Shine! Network. Her greatest achievements are as a friend, daughter, sister, wife to her college sweetheart, and mother of two busy, breathtaking boys.



FOOD

What's on the menu?
What's off the menu?
How many choices are there?
Who prepares it?
Who chooses it?
Who buys it?

SCHEDULE

Which night can the family eat together?
Do you have more than one dinnertime?
What time is dinner?

SOCIALIZATION

How do you handle technology, conversation, manners, chores, and distractions at dinnertime?

Take charge of your family dinners.

Focus on one area where you are struggling, or all four. Revisit your plan regularly and evaluate.

contact Brienne to ask about her personal coaching services at [redroundorgreen\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:redroundorgreen(at)gmail(dot)com)

SETTING

Where is your meal?
How do you start and end your meal together?

Schedule

MOON LANDING:

MOUNTAINTOP:

OBSTACLES:

STEPS TO BASECAMP:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Food

MOON LANDING:

MOUNTAINTOP:

OBSTACLES:

STEPS TO BASECAMP:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Socialization

MOON LANDING:

MOUNTAINTOP:

OBSTACLES:

STEPS TO BASECAMP:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Setting

MOON LANDING:

MOUNTAINTOP:

OBSTACLES:

STEPS TO BASECAMP:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.