

Who's at the Table and Why Does It Matter?

**The Relationship Between Family
Meals and Adolescent Diets**

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Rise of the Family Meal

- Historians argue the family meal became an important family event in the late 19th century. Prior to that, most meals were for refueling and thus were largely utilitarian in nature. Family members often ate alone.
- Since then, the family meal, particularly dinner and holiday meals has become an important part of family life.

The Death of the Family Meal?

- For at least 100 years, observers have worried about the state of the American family; some claim it is dying.
- More recently these concerns have turned to what is perceived as the death of this important family event.
- While there are legitimate concerns about threats to these to family meals from television watching while eating or texting at the dinner table, fears about the family meal's demise appear greatly exaggerated.

Frequency of the Family Dinner

- A number of studies including our own indicate that many children & adolescents eat most or all of their dinners at home, usually with family.
- Other studies find that children believe it is important to eat dinner with their families, averaging about 20 minutes when they do.
- Data from time diary studies find that over 80 percent of parents eat the majority of their dinners at home.
- However, time diary studies of adults indicate less time is spent eating meals currently than in past decades.

The Functions of Family Meals

- Social scientists have argued that family meals provide a number of services for families and their members over and above of the ingestion of food.
- Studies indicate that such meals are a principal site for socializing children, not only in terms of eating behavior but also in terms of more general beliefs, norms, and values. Meals include information sharing, scheduling of joint family member activities, and disciplining children.
- Why are meals important in this regard? Because they are one of the few times family members engage in the same activity at the same time and because family members need to eat.
- Others argue that the family meal actually creates the sense of family for its members; transforms members of a household into members of a family; members of something special (DeVault).

The Family Meal Mystique

- A significant number of recent studies have found uniformly positive effects of family dinner participation on children's eating habits, school performance, and normative behavior. (Leading one author to write a book titled "The Surprising Power of the Family Meal.")
- This leads to the perception that for children to benefit, they simply need to show up on time.
- We argue that getting children to participate 1) requires effort and 2) requires children's and parental perception that this is a special/important family event.

The Family Rituals

- For meals to create a sense of family, they be seen as an important event in the lives of family members, and for family meals to provide the benefits described above, the family meal routine must become a family ritual.
- Bossard identified elements of family ritual as 1) a regularly scheduled activity, 2) at which family members are expected to attend, 3) and that family members perceive as important and special.
- Family psychologists argue that family rituals are significant means of reducing stress among family members (Fiese).

The Family Meal Ritual

- Bossard and Fiese both found that dinner was the most frequently practiced family ritual.
- Family psychologists have found a number of psychological benefits of family dinner rituals.
- We have found the more that mothers, fathers, and their children perceive dinner as an important family ritual, the more frequently children participate in dinner with their families.

Family Meal Ritual and Time Use Data from Houston

- As we include findings from our Houston study (“Parental Time, Income, Role Strain, Coping, and Children’s Diet and Nutrition”), we provide a quick overview of our project (described more fully in the appendix of the resource guide).
- We collected time diary data and information about family meals, including their ritual nature, from 300 families (fathers, mothers, one child). In addition dietary intake and body composition data were obtained from the children. Children aged 9-11 & 13-15.

Time Diary Data

- We have 2-day time diary from the parents; from the children, a 1-day recall of time use plus a 2-day time diary. Data from these instruments tell us what activities each individual engaged in, how much time they spent in each of these activities, who they were with when they engaged in the activities, and where the activities took place. Thus, for example, we can report how many minutes a child spent eating dinner at home with her/his family.

The Effects of Family Meal Rituals

- Fathers who believed dinner to be an important family ritual were more likely to have children who spent less time eating fast food and spouses who spent more time preparing food and eating dinner at home.
- Mothers who believed this spent more time preparing food and spent more time eating dinner at home.
- Children who believed this ate dinner more frequently with their families and spent more time eating breakfast, lunch and dinner with their families. So there is a spillover effect of the dinner ritual to other meals.

Potential Barriers to Family Meals

Parental work, television, and family conflict.

- Parents who work outside the home do not place their children in grave danger. There are aspects of work, however, that do have negative effects on families, namely work schedules and work hours.
- 30% of adults in the labor force work non-standard schedules (weekend work; hours other than 9am to 5pm) and many lack flexibility in either their work days or work hours (Presser).

The Effects of Work Schedules on Family Eating

- When both parents worked non-standard work hours, mothers were more likely to purchase takeout foods; when both parents worked standard hours, the more time their children spent in eating with their parents in full-service restaurants.
- When parents enjoyed flexibility in their work hours, more time was spent preparing meals and eating meals at home. In families where both parents experienced less flexible work hours, fathers were more likely to have purchased fast food and children were more likely to have spent more time eating fast food.

More Work Effects

- Mothers who spent more time working or commuting were less likely to perceive family dinner as an important family event.
- It is important to note here that non-standard work hours or lack of schedule flexibility had no association with perceptions that dinner is an important family event.

Television and Meals

- Children who tended to eat breakfast and dinner while watching TV were less likely to perceive eating meals with family as important and spent less time eating dinner with their families.
- Mothers who spent more time watching TV tended to spend less time planning and preparing meals.

Family Conflict and Meals

- Some researchers have reported some families exhibit considerable conflict during meals and have suggested in such families members attempt to avoid eating with their families.
- Our data indicate that the more frequently each family member perceived frequent conflict at dinner, the less likely they perceived dinner to be an important ritual.
- Children who perceived such conflict consumed less fiber but more carbohydrates, and had greater waist circumferences.
- Children were less likely to view dinner as an important family event if their parents tended to criticize their eating habits.

Family Meals Don't Just Happen

- DeVault's qualitative data suggested successful family meals take effort in the form of planning, scheduling, and taking into account family members' preferences. Our data indicate children who participate frequently in family dinners do so because they and their parents perceive these events to be important and because their mothers schedule the meals so that most/all family members can participate.

Nutritional Impacts of Family Meals

- Research from the Project EAT (Eating Among Teens) found that adolescents perceived family meals to be healthier than alternative eating arrangements such as eating alone and their own eating would be healthier if they ate more frequently with their families (Neumark-Sztainer).
- The same study found that teens who ate dinner more frequently with family consumed more nutrient dense foods in terms of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and consumed fewer soft drinks.

More Nutrition Findings

- The Growing Up Today Study (GUTS) found that as 9-14 year olds increased the number of times a week they ate dinner with their families, the greater the likelihood they consumed at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables per day and less likely they ate fried foods away from home or drank sodas (Gillman).

Family Meals and Obesity

- Some cross-sectional studies have found less obesity among children who participate in family meals and one longitudinal study found that children who had eaten dinner with family more frequently at an earlier period of time were less likely to be overweight three years later. However, other studies conflict with these findings.

Family Meal Rituals and Obesity

- There was no association between obesity and family meal ritual in our study. However, the stronger children's perception that family dinners were rituals, the more likely they consumed more calories; male children more protein; & female children more cholesterol. Males who held this perception tended to report less likelihood of gaining weight and greater chance of engaging in regular exercise and team sports.

Family Dinners Affect Participation in Other Eating Events

- In our study, while the frequency of eating dinner with family did not affect nutrient intake among the children, it was associated with less snacking among boys & decreased breakfast skipping by girls. Participation in family breakfasts reduced snacking in all children.

Other Family Meals: Breakfast

- Few families in our study ate breakfast together. However, more frequent family breakfasts were associated with less breakfast skipping by children; among girls family breakfasts were associated with less dieting; among boys and girls, participation in family breakfasts was associated with children's perception that they were more physically active than their peers.

Other Family Meals: Lunch

- Parents, particularly mothers, who were able to eat lunch at home had children who were more likely to eat lunch with family. These children in turn were more likely to consume fewer calories from carbohydrates but consume more sodium, cholesterol and iron (DRI). 9-11 year olds who ate lunch more frequently with family were at greater risk of obesity. Boys who eat fewer family lunches had lower BMIs and were less likely to be overweight. We will soon begin to investigate the actual foods these children typically consumed at lunch.

Family Meals and Parental Influences

- One mechanism by which parents teach children about food is through modeling. Research shows that parents eating fruits and vegetables in the presence of their children increases children's consumption of these foods.
- Others have found that parents play a more active role in attempting to influence children's eating. One technique is prompting, with mothers electing to encourage particular food choices and fathers selecting pressure to get children to eat particular foods.
- A number of studies indicate that efforts to monitor/control children's food intake is associated with obesity. That is, attempts to limit caloric intake in order to reduce the risk of obesity may have the opposite effect.

Quick Conclusions

Based on the above, we argue that family meals are not only an important part of family life, they are also important for children's health.

The question is how to get more families to engage in family meals.

Our own research indicates fathers' participation in meal preparation reduces the amount of time their spouses must engage in these activities. Getting more fathers involved in meal preparation may increase the importance of family meals among dads.

Others have found involving children in meal preparation, particularly in selecting and preparing vegetable dishes, increases their consumption of these. We suspect this also increases their participation in family dinner.

Future Research

- Given the inconclusiveness of some of the research results regarding family meals, however, a greater understanding of what takes place at family meals is needed.
- What is the role of conflict during family meals and how does it affect food intake?
- Are family meals eaten in full-service restaurants true family meals and are they associated with healthy eating by children?