

Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



Fact Sheet

What the Research Tells Us About Family Meals

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Much research has been done in the area of strengthening families, and a key concept repeatedly cited is that strong families spend time together. One way of spending more time together is during family meals. **Although it may seem a simple and old-fashioned activity, taking time out for family meals has a lot of hidden benefits.** The goal of this fact sheet is to provide both nutrition and family life educators interdisciplinary information to encourage families to eat meals together by sharing what the research tells us about family meals in America today. A review of the literature shows that eating dinner together can have a positive effect upon the character and social development of the children (Center on Substance Abuse, (CASA, 2001), family communication skills (Compan et al., 2002), nutritional intake of the entire family (Fisher et al., 2001; Fisher et al., 2002; Steiner et al., 1996; Gillman et al., 2000; Coon et al., 2001; Carter et al., 2000 and Cutting et al., 1999), development of family traditions (Steiner et al., 1996, Compan et al., 2002) and the culinary skills of family members (Stocks and Brown, 2002).

Are Families Eating Together?

Numerous studies have been conducted to look at the trends in family meals. Although eat-

ing together as a family is a challenge for many families, a majority of parents feel that family meals are very important. An article in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (Neuman-Sztainer et al., 2003, page 317) states “there are many anecdotal reports regarding changes in family meal patterns overtime” ... but “family meals are clearly not extinct.” Although most of the studies done on family meals clearly show that most families value eating dinner together, many barriers limit this activity.

An informal research study on family meal-times polled participants in groups taught by Iowa State University (ISU) Extension staff (Steiner et al., 1996.) Respondents cited conflicting schedules most often as the reason families did not eat together more frequently. Two-worker families, mother working, a second job, shift work, working late, husband working too many hours, and teens having jobs were all listed as barriers. This research showed that 42% ate most meals together and 48% said that their family was not eating together as much as they would like.

Similar results were found in 2000. Gillman and colleagues reported from the ongoing Nurses’ Health Study II that 40% of the children ate with family members on most days and 43% had dinner with their family every day.

All of these studies reveal that family meals are of high importance to parents but barriers in today's society limit the number of family meals. The research also shows, unsurprisingly, the decrease in frequency of family meals as adolescents become older.

Does Eating Together Influence the Family's Nutrition Intake and Diet Quality?

Common sense and anecdotal responses tell us that families who eat together should also be eating more nutritious meals. Recent research supports these feelings. Gillman and colleagues (2002) collected nutritional and dietary patterns data of children eating together with their family. Their results revealed that eating family dinner was associated with healthful dietary intake patterns, including more fruits and vegetables, less fried food and soda, less saturated and trans fatty acids, lower glycemic load, more fiber and macronutrients from food.

Research on adolescents in Minnesota (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003, page 317) showed that the "frequency of family meals was positively associated with intake of fruits, vegetables, grains and calcium-rich foods and negatively associated with soft drink consumption." This study concluded, "family meals appear to play an important role in promoting positive dietary habits among adolescents" (page 317).

A study conducted at Brigham Young University (Stocks and Brown, 2002) looked at food choices and confidence in food preparation skills of college students. The results showed that past experience with food preparation and home cooked meals lead to greater confidence, cooking skills, and healthier food choices. The students' confidence in preparing foods was highest if their family prepared many foods and if students had experience in meal preparation. In addition, the students' current intake of some foods was related to the frequency of eating family meals together.

Increase in Social Skills, Family Traditions, and Sense of Family Belonging

Parents who work hard to raise successful children and care about their parenting skills have always known that eating together as a family had a particular significance in the course of a child's life. Joining together for family meals can make a difference. There is something almost magical that happens at the dinner table that might be difficult to measure. The research has finally begun to surface to prove the significance of the bonding that takes place when families eat together. The ISU Extension study revealed that respondents felt that "when families eat dinner together, parents can teach children table manners, social skills, family values, a sense of community and basic cooking skills" (Steiner et al., 1996, page 3). A study in Spain (Compan et al., 2002) concluded that the youth they studied that had mental health complaints ate less frequently with both parents, shared less activities, practiced less family rituals, and showed a lower level of satisfaction in perceived family function than the comparison group.

Influence of Television on Family Meals and Nutritional Quality

Televisions have been identified as barriers to strengthening families because they reduce the amount of conversation that takes place within the family. Parent educators offer advice on turning off the television as a way of improving family communication. Dietitians are now echoing these words saying that television viewing during meals can affect nutritional intake.

Research conducted near Washington, D.C. (Coon et al., 2001) looked at the relationship between the presence of television during meals and children's food consumption patterns. Their conclusions were that the dietary patterns of children in grades four, five, and six from families in

which television viewing is a normal part of meal routines may include fewer fruits and vegetables and more pizzas, snack foods, and soda than the dietary patterns of children from families in which television viewing and eating are separate activities. Similar results were found in a study by Carter et al., which looked at children's meals eaten while watching television. They recommended that obesity prevention programs should consider targeting decreasing dinner-meal television watching, especially in minority households.

Parents as Nutritional Role Models

The research has also shown that parents are a child's first and best role model when it comes to mealtime practices and the quantities and types of foods eaten. Several studies have examined the relationship of parental characteristics and the eating behaviors of their children with the premise that obese parents are more likely to have obese children since parents provide both genes and environment for their children.

Findings (Cutting et al., 1999) have shown that heavier mothers of preschoolers resulted in heavier daughters and that mothers' overeating habits result in higher intake of snack food by their daughters. It was also found (USDA/ARS, 2001) mothers' own eating habits were more influential than their attempts to control their daughter's intake of food.

Results from a study at Baylor College of Medicine (Fisher et al., 2001) suggest that by simply being a good role model and making milk more available in the home, mothers can increase the amount of calcium their daughters consume. Additional research at Baylor (Fisher et al., 2002) demonstrated that parents' own fruit and vegetable intake may encourage fruit and vegetable intake in their daughters, leading to higher micronutrient intakes and lower dietary fat intakes. Conversely, pressure to eat may discourage fruit and vegetable intake among young girls.

Family meals with parents serving as role models can be the most powerful nutrition education around. Children learn from and emulate their parent's eating preferences and patterns.

Adolescent Drug and Alcohol Abuse

During adolescence many parents are at a loss for how to connect with their teenager, and family meals may just be the time and place to make this connection. Family meals allow parents of adolescents the chance to stay involved with their children's lives, friends, and activities. According to a study at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (Tufts University, 1997) the more that families sat down together for meals, the better adjusted their teenage children were. Researchers found that those who ate with "adult family members an average of at least 5 times a week were less likely to use drugs or fall victim to depression than adolescents who ate with parents only 3 times a week" (Tufts University, 1997, page 2). The study also concluded that students were more motivated to do well in school and had better relationships with other youths.

A similar, but larger study from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA, 2001) at Columbia University also linked the number of times families eat together with the number of teenagers who are likely to use drugs and alcohol. CASA's Teen Surveys have repeatedly shown that the more often a teen eats dinner with his or her family, the less likely that teen is to smoke, drink, or use illegal drugs. This research validates that the simple act of eating dinner as a family has a tremendous impact on the character and social development of the youth.

What's a Family to Do?

- Set a pattern of family dinners when the children are young so it becomes a habit.
- Check your schedules often and make family meals a priority. These meals may be break-

fast, lunch, or dinner; eaten at home or in a restaurant. The key is to spend the time together.

- Turn off the television, radio, cell phones, and other distractions and allow time for tuning into each other.
- Allow every member of the family to contribute to the conversation and keep the conversations polite. The dinner table is not the place for conflict or discipline.
- Listen to other family members' thoughts and views. Get to know what they think and feel about a variety of topics, not just what happened to them during the day. An occasional conversation starter may be needed.
- Get every family member involved in family meals whether it's planning the menus, shopping for groceries, setting the table, chopping the vegetables, or doing the dishes.
- Remember parents serve as role models for healthy eating.

Summary and Conclusions

We have only begun to scratch the surface of the significance and importance of eating family meals together. But there's one thing for sure ... it's more important than ever for families to sit down for a meal together. All of the research points to the fact that eating family meals together influences family communications, nutritional intake for the whole family, development of family traditions, childhood obesity, and character and social development, while building and strengthening family bonds. If you think you're too busy to eat together as a family, think again, there are too many reasons not to.

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