

Family Nutrition: The Truth About Family Meals¹

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Introduction

In a recent book entitled *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*, author Miriam Weinstein asks this question:

What if I told you that there was a magic bullet—something that would improve the quality of your daily life, your children's chances of success in the world, [and] your family's health. . .? Something that is inexpensive, simple to produce, and within the reach of pretty much everyone? (Weinstein, 2005, p. 1).

You guessed it, that magic bullet is the family meal. According to research, eating together as a family on a regular basis has some surprising effects. When sharing a meal together family bonds become stronger, children are better adjusted, family members eat more nutritional meals, they are less likely to be overweight, and they are less likely to abuse alcohol or other drugs. Given the positive benefits of eating together, why are not more families doing it?

Trends

Over the last several decades, there has been a growing concern that families are no longer eating together. However, recent research suggests that this trend may be changing. In a recent study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, the number of teenagers reporting frequent family dinners (five or more times per week), increased from 51% in 1996 to 59% in 2007 (CASA, 2007). Likewise, in another study by Child Trends using the National Survey of Children's Health (n.d.), approximately 70% of teenagers reported that they eat meals with their family four or more times per week.

These numbers seem to suggest that most adolescents in the U.S. are eating meals with their families more days than not on a weekly basis. What about the children and youth in the state of Florida; do they follow the national trend? According to the most recent data collected in 2003 through the National Survey of Children's Health, 47.3% of children and youth aged 0–17 ate a meal together with their family *every day* during the past week. This compared to 47.2% nationally. Seventy-five percent of Florida children and youth reported eating family meals at least four days per week. This trend did not

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differ widely based on the age of the child as shown in Table 1. Both young children and teenagers in the state of Florida reported eating family meals at least four times or more per week.

The trends are hopeful, but there are still a large number of children and youth who do not share meals together with their families. Although trying to get the family together for a family meal is very challenging, the benefits appear to outweigh the costs.

Table 1. Frequency of Family Meals by Children Aged 0–17 in the State of Florida

	0-5 Years Old	6-11 Years Old	12-17 Years Old
0 Days Per Week	4.3%	1.9%	7.7%
1-3 Days Per Week	19.2%	15.1%	24.0%
4-6 Days Per Week	23.2%	31.4%	30.6%
Everyday	53.4%	51.6%	37.7%

National Survey of Children's Health, <http://nschdata.org/>

Family Togetherness

One benefit of eating meals together is the affect on strengthening family bonds. Family meals provides a daily time for the whole family to be together. For younger children, having routine family meals can provide a sense of security and a feeling of belonging in the family (Satter, 1987). Older children and teenagers, too, prefer eating together as a family. In a recent Columbia University study, 84% of teenagers said they preferred to have dinner with their families, compared to 13% who prefer eating alone (CASA, 2007).

Family meals are also a representation of the ethnic, cultural, or religious heritage of the family (Weinstein, 2005). What the family eats, how they eat, and when they eat reflects this cultural identity. As children participate in these cultural traditions, they begin to learn more about their heritage and their family's history. A study from Emory University found that children who knew a lot about their family history, through family meals and other interactions, had a closer relationship to family members, higher

self esteem, and a greater sense of control over their own lives (Duke, Fivush, Lazarus, & Bohanek, 2003).

Communication

Regular family meals provide opportunities for the family to develop better communication (Lyttle & Baugh, 2008; FY1054). At family meals, parents and children have time to catch up with each other and learn about the events that happened that day (Leon & Spengler, 2007). It also provides parents a learning opportunity where they can teach social skills, table manners, and basic cooking skills. Parents should model good communication skills, like the RECIPE for good communication (Forthun & Kaplan, 2008; FY1060), and encourage all family members to be involved.

Well-Being

Regular family meals are related to better adjustment in children and youth (Eisenberg, et al., 2004). Research shows that youth who have regular family meals report getting better grades in school, are more motivated at school, and get along better with others. On the other hand, those who do not eat regular family meals together are more likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use other drugs (CASA, 2007). Children and youth who do not eat family meals together are also more likely to report feeling depressed or have trouble at school.

Even among older teenagers, who often have conflicting schedules and do not eat regularly with their family, the risk is higher when they do not regularly participate in family meals (CASA, 2007). A team of researchers at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health found that even if the family members are not very close to each other, having a meal together as a family reduces the risk for many of these troubling behaviors among youth (Eisenberg, et al., 2004).

Nutrition

Eating meals together as a family also means that family members are more likely to eat healthy foods (Lyttle & Baugh, 2008; FY1054). Families that eat together are less likely to get food out (fried food and soda) and are more likely to serve fruits or vegetables

and other healthy foods during dinnertime (Marino & Butkus, n.d.). Some researchers found that eating meals together reduces the risk for being overweight, especially in families with an authoritative parenting style (Forthun, 2008; FY1059).

Things to Consider

There are two caveats to the benefits of family dinners on the health and well-being of family members. The first is eating in front of the television. Although a recent study found that families who eat in front of the TV are still more likely to eat healthy foods than those who do not eat together, they are less likely to eat healthy meals than those who eat together at the dinner table (Feldman, et al., 2007). The second caveat is for families who eat together at the dinner table but who frequently purchase prepared foods (e.g., take-out). Although the family may receive the benefits of increased family togetherness and well-being, they may not receive nutritional benefits of a home-cooked meal.

Conclusion

Eating together as a family is more than just a meal, it is an opportunity for families to come together regularly in support of family unity. Most research suggests that both parents and the children value sharing a meal together and find the experience rewarding. Although there is no guarantee that eating together as a family will resolve all family problems, it may provide the opportunity to make a fresh start.

How to Get the Whole Family to the Dinner Table

- Make shared family meals a priority. Emphasize the importance of being together, not creating an elaborate meal that everyone will enjoy. Set regular mealtimes by writing them on the calendar. Let everyone know when dinner is served and when they must be home.
- If the family is not used to eating together regularly, start small. At first, get used to eating together by scheduling family meals two or three days per week. Then as the weeks progress, begin to have more and more regular meals.

- Make family meals fun. Include children in the preparation of the meal and in the decision about what foods will be offered during the meal. Of course, parents have final say about what foods are prepared, but allowing the children to participate can create a fun environment.
- Keep a sense of humor while at the dinner table.
- Eliminate distractions, like TV, telephone, and cell phones.
- Try to limit the conversations to positive or neutral topics. Do not let the conversation get out of hand and allow family members to criticize one another. Keep it light and fun. Create an environment that leads to healthy communication.
- Be a good role model. Show children good etiquette and table manners.
- Eat slowly. Remember, this is an opportunity for the family to spend time together. Do not make it about the food; make it about the family.

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Extension Resources

Promoting Family Meals

Purdue University, Center for Families

<http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/CFF/promotingfamilymeals/index.html>