Families Who Eat Together

It’s no secret that the family dynamic has changed drastically in the past 50 years. No longer are families expected to look and act like *Leave it to Beaver’s* Cleaver family; instead it’s much more common to see single parent families or dual earner families. In addition to letting go of the ideal mother image with her ever-present apron and oven mitts, we also see fewer families sitting down at the dining table for shared meals. While it may seem like a simple thing, sharing meals offers an established time and place to discuss the day-to-day activities of each family member, and to communicate feelings. It can also make healthy choices much easier, as all family members will likely eat the meal that is being served. When families don’t partake in shared meals, there are questions on whether this simple yet fundamental communication and decision-making is lost, and how it affects each member of the family. Studies to determine the effects of family eating practices have provided a great deal of feedback from both adolescents and adults, and tend to show that eating together as a family is overall a very positive experience. My goal in examining these studies is to compile a series of results on both nutritional health and adolescent behavior, and to look at these results in terms of how they relate to the non-normative family.

In recent decades, several studies have been conducted on the frequency of shared family meals, and their effects on both parents and adolescents. Overwhelmingly, more frequently shared meals have been associated with better nutrition and greater health in family relationships. In a 2011 article entitled “The Surprising Benefits of the Family Meal,” the authors argue that a decrease in the frequency of shared family meals has had a serious impact across all age groups, citing college campus observations of college students preferring to eat alone in cafeterias rather than with friends. According to the article, both children and their parents perceive shared meals as a positive and enjoyable experience, and the decline in family meals results from other barriers such as scheduling conflicts. The authors also note that sharing meals results in overall greater family connectedness, which results in protectiveness against risky behaviors such as substance use, and greater academic performance. Healthier food choices, including greater intake of fruits, vegetables, grains, and calcium-rich foods, and lower soft drink intake, have also been observed, as well as possible prevention of obesity. The authors summarize the article by stating the importance of overcoming barriers to sharing family meals, given their impact on dietary and behavioral well-being in children. One of the notable aspects of this particular article is the authors’ presumption of the heteronormative nuclear family. The article begins with a “historical background” describing the family meal as a national pastime, and referring to family meals as “the very glue of society.” While there are strong points about positive results of eating together, the article excludes any consideration of family makeup, and does not offer explanation on where the statistics used came from.
The 2003 article “Family meal patterns: Associations with sociodemographic characteristics and improved dietary intake among adolescents,” offers a much more thorough analysis of the effects on family meals on adolescent diets. The study used data from Project EAT (Eating Among Teens) which was conducted in the St. Paul/Minneapolis, MN area. Participating students answered questionnaires about the frequency of family meals in their homes, and their dietary intake was assessed using the Youth and Adolescent Food Frequency Questionnaire. Students also reported their gender, school level, race, mother’s employment status, and socioeconomic status. Though the responses across and within sociodemographic status were varied, the overall numbers of students reporting frequent family meals were relatively high. The findings of the study provided “clear evidence of a strong, positive association between frequency of family meals and quality of dietary intake.” With evidence of family meal frequency declining as children grow older, and the employment status of mothers inversely relating to family meal frequency, the article posed finding ways to overcome busy schedules as an important future focus. More working mothers and more actively involved teens points to a need to find additional ways to build family connectedness and promote healthy diets.

In addition to busy schedules, there are several other barriers to holding regular shared family meals, despite their relation to positive effects on adolescents. The 2006 article “Adolescent and Parent Views of Family Meals,” also identifies teens’ desire for autonomy, dissatisfaction with family relations, and dislike of the food being served. Like the previous study, this study also identified a correlation between increasing age and decreasing desire to partake in family meals. Despite these barriers, the study displays increased family connectedness, better nutritional intake, and decreased risk of disordered eating. The focus of the article, as its name implies, was to survey both adolescents and adults to compare their views on shared meals. Using data from Project EAT combined with telephone interviews with parents, the overall result of the study revealed that the majority of parents and adolescents valued the importance of sharing family meals, and perceived them to be a positive experience. However, parents were more likely to report eating together than children, and younger adolescents more likely than teens. Overall, greater frequency of eating together resulted in a more positive perception of sharing meals.

Frequent family meals have also been shown to reduce risky behavior in adolescents, including substance use, violence, eating disorders, and other illegal or life-threatening behaviors. In the 2006 study “Family Dinner Meal Frequency and Adolescent Development: Relationships with Developmental Assets and High-Risk Behaviors,” anonymous surveys of sixth through twelfth grade students were used to compare the frequency of family meals and performance of high-risk behavior. The study analyzed two types of positive developmental assets in adolescents: external assets, which included family and community support, and internal assets, which included assets that youths use to guide themselves. Family meals were categorized under external assets, alongside family connectedness and other positive familial support. According to the authors, “the rituals developed by families during mealtimes and the repeated behaviors over time build a sense of unity, identity, and connectedness that may be particularly important during adolescent development.” The ultimate results of the study showed an inverse relationship between frequent family meals and all high-risk behaviors. The authors
acknowledged other external assets such as family support, positive family communication, parental involvement in school, and family boundaries as having an impact on adolescents’ behavior, but ultimately pointed to family meals as a regularly scheduled form of connection and communication for easing daily stress.

The 2010 article, “The relationship between frequency of family dinner and adolescent problem behaviors after adjusting for other family characteristics,” provides strikingly similar results to the previous article, even after considering and adjusting for the other external assets. The author’s goal was to consider whether frequent family meals were simply a proxy for other family characteristics such as the quality of interpersonal relationships within the family or parental vigilance. The data collected included information about family relationships, such as parental awareness, and empirical methods were used to analyze the results while cancelling out parent-child connectedness and other external assets. While the results did provide a lower correlation between frequent family meals and high-risk behaviors, the inverse relationship was still there. This article points toward other forms of family connectedness in playing an important role in protecting against such behaviors, but family meals are still shown to be effective themselves. Ultimately, the study confirmed the findings of several others in that family protectiveness results in a great deal less participation in high-risk behaviors by adolescents.

With several studies on family meals having obtained data from Project EAT, it is important to finally see the results of Project EAT as published in 2010 in, “Family meals and adolescents: What have we learned from Project EAT (Eating Among Teens)?” Project EAT took part in two stages, the first being a survey on family meals completed by both middle and high school students. The second part of Project EAT was a five year longitudinal study which included participants from the first stage. One of the most notable findings of the project was the wide variation in family meal patterns, and the common issue of barriers to shared meals, such as conflicting schedules between parents and children. As mentioned in other studies, parents were more likely to report sharing meals together than adolescents; they were also more likely to report a pleasant atmosphere, more rules, and less television watching during family meals. However, the majority of both parents and adolescents shared a pleasant perception of family meals. Like the other studies, this article also identifies an inverse relationship between frequent family meals and poor diet and disordered eating habits; diet in particular was noted, as the longitudinal study showed that frequent family meals for adolescents resulted in better nutrition choices as young adults. The study confirmed that overall, family meals are a beneficial part of family life, and have positive correlations with behavior and nutrition choices.

Of every article examined, there are clear correlations between frequent family meals and adolescent behavior and nutritional intake. However, there are some very important factors to consider in examining these results. As mentioned earlier, “The Surprising Benefits of the Family Meal” contains a great deal of bias implying that the majority of families are heteronormative nuclear families rather than acknowledging the diverse range of family life that exists today. Nearly every article examined noted that the results had been obtained by survey or interview; none had the opportunity to use objective observation to obtain results. Adolescents were less likely than parents to report sharing family meals; the authors of “Adolescent and Parent Views” noted that parents may have had higher reporting
percentages due to influence by social desirability. Heteronormative beliefs regarding the family include a family that shares meals each day, which may have encouraged parents to report more shared meals than their children reported. “The relationship between frequency of family dinner and adolescent problem behaviors after adjusting for other family characteristics,” contains some very useful analysis on whether it is really the shared family meal alone which results in all of the mentioned positive effects on adolescents. While the family meal does play an important role, this article acknowledges that it is not the only factor in family life, and it is also an indicator of existing strong family characteristics.

Picturing the family meal, it has many implications: the family gathers at the end of the day, enjoys a nutritious meal, and discusses what is happening in their lives. Individual problems with work and school are talked over and solutions are proposed. Studies provide clear correlation between such shared time, and they are not to be disregarded. With ever rising numbers of childhood obesity, a regular activity to promote healthy choices and nutritious food intake would be beneficial to many. Similarly, preventing adolescents from performing high-risk behaviors simply by spending more time together as a family is beneficial in itself, in addition to better health for all family members. However, the family meal does not appear to be the only factor in good nutrition and positive behavior in adolescence. Positive family interaction on a regular basis and vigilant parenting are also important in establishing guidelines for children and providing values and support for their development. The ultimate implication of these studies, then, is that maintaining strong communication in the family and offering support and guidance for adolescents will result in less high-risk behavior, and sharing meals will help adolescents to make better nutrition choices. While it’s to be expected that both parents and children have increasingly busy schedules, these studies show that it will likely be beneficial to any and all families to make more time for family meals.
Works Cited


