



The Family Table - Helping Young People Develop Healthy Eating Habits

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

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At a recent conference I attended on eating disorders, I was reminded (again) of the importance of family meal times - sitting together around the dinner table and sharing a meal.

When I hear of shared family meal times, though, I automatically envisage the idealised family which is represented so wonderfully in 1950's and 60's television and cinema, and reflect on how unattainable this is. But these gender stereotyped representations of the idyllic family – breadwinning dad coming home, placing his hat on the rack, and sitting down to a meal cooked by his loving housewife, with cherub like children gazing lovingly into his eyes – are far from the truth of modern day family life: mum and dad arriving home late from work with take-away pad Thai and curry chicken, kids glued to a screen (TV, computer, phone, Playstation, iPad, portable DVD player...etc) and so on.

Some of the earliest evidence of the significance of shared meals comes from archaeological discoveries of ancient hearth's, carbon dated to have been used in the era of some of our early ancestors – in particular *Homo Erectus* –

an evolutionary ancestor of ours thought to exist somewhere between 1,000,000 and 400,000 years ago. The hearth is intriguing in that it may imply that this species was gathering to cook, eat, and to share warmth and comfort. Is it possible that the early beginnings of language, social structure and culture were formed around these communal hearths, as the members of this species began to interact more complexly with each other? Difficult to say, but no other species of animal gathers to cook and eat together.

Many of us are familiar with the abundance of research that demonstrates a strong link between regular family meal time and positive psychosocial outcomes for young people, but I wanted to take the time to summarise some of this research for you.

- The number of days a child/adolescent eats dinner with their family is a better predictor of positive emotional development and school achievement than age,

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gender, parents education level, or family type;

- Adolescent girls who eat more meals with their families are less likely to engage in binge eating or chronic dieting and are significantly less likely to use aggressive steps to lose weight – dieting pills, laxatives or vomiting later on;
- Family mealtimes contribute to literacy development in young children – children whose families chat more during dinner time have larger vocabularies, are superior at conceptualisation, have better articulation at earlier ages and score better on tests of reading and language;
- Adolescents who eat with the family tend to eat more nutritious foods;
- A tense family atmosphere around the dinner table is often a sign of broader family difficulties, and can lead to higher anxiety and possibly disordered eating patterns in some

children – particularly poor communication and criticism;

- More frequent family meals in childhood predict higher family cohesion and problem/emotion focussed coping skills in early adolescents – both very important for positive development;
- Children who eat family meals fewer than 3 times per week are more than twice as likely as those who have frequent family meals to report tension among family members, and they are much less likely to think their parents are proud of them;
- An American study found that the majority of teens who ate less than 3 meals a week with their parents reported wanting to do so more often!

(Most of the research demonstrates that largest effects are seen when families gather to eat 4-5 or more nights per week, with average meals lasting about 20 minutes)

So, sharing meals together as a family provides potential opportunities for interactions that reinforce belonging, communication, resilience, help develop patterns of healthy eating, help build feelings of family cohesion and also

develop problem solving skills in young people. But it's obviously not all about simply sharing a meal - the positive effects that we see are signals of much broader, healthier family values and behaviours – most notably – that family time is valued, parents demonstrate to their children that they are willing to make time for them, that communication is open, and so on.

So what can we do as parents?

1. Make the time to eat together as many times as possible during the week – for some families this family meal may be breakfast, not dinner – that is fine;
2. Get your kids involved in the preparation, distribution and cleaning up after the dinner;
3. If during a week, family meal times are not possible it is imperative to make sure that there is a good deal of time in the week set aside for family activity and simple play.
4. Discourage all forms of distraction from the table – especially iPad's, phones, computers, toys, books and so on.
5. Play games at the dinner table – simple ones like "scissors, paper and rock" are fantastic. If you don't know any make them up!

6. Think of some interesting topics and questions to ask your children and engage them in a dialogue.
7. If you are separated or divorced, still insist on family meals and, where possible, invite your ex-partner to the table.
8. Try not to ask closed questions ("did you have a good day") at the dinner table as they don't facilitate conversation – they require only one word answers. Ask open ended questions that require a longer answer (Tell me a little about something that was really good today").
9. Find something in what your child tells you to offer them praise and positive feedback.
10. Don't limit the above to the family table – try to do it as general parenting practice.

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Just a Little Too Thin: How to Pull Your Child Back from the Brink of an Eating Disorder*, (2006), BY Michael Strober and Meg Schneider;
- *If Not Dieting, Then What?* (2005), by Dr. Rick Kausman.



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