

The big benefits of family meals

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Extension Family Science Specialist and Associate Professor
Department of Child Development and Family Science, NDSU

Sharing the Family Meal

Among the most lasting and powerful traditions in family life is one that seems to have more influence than almost any other – **the family meal**. Recalling your favorite family experiences usually leads to thinking of such times as the weekly Sunday meal, family mealtimes during Thanksgiving or other holidays, or a Saturday morning breakfast with Mom or Dad. Why are family meals so powerful? Sharing a family meal provides an experience that touches all of our senses – sight, touch, taste, smell and listening to warm laughter or good conversation. Family meals help provide a regular, consistent opportunity to create a shared experience that is meaningful and offers a sense of belonging to all. Research has shown that regular and meaningful family meals offer a large variety of benefits to children and parents.

The Family-centered Meal

Family meals offer the opportunity to connect with each other, communicate about family happenings, and give each other time and attention. While families are encouraged to share meals, not every meal has to be a sit-down dinner extravaganza.

The most important thing about family meals is to make them **frequent, fun and family-centered**.

Couples or families will benefit more from family meals if they occur more **frequently** during the week. Typically, research suggests that more than half of families with children in the United States share a meal five or more times a week. A concern, however, is that 30 percent to 35 percent of families often eat less than three meals a week together, which means less time for connecting and communicating. Changes in family life, such as the increase in dual-earner families and the rise in single-parent families, may make eating together frequently more difficult for families. Families, however, should try to set aside regular and consistent family meal opportunities to eat together as often as possible.

Fun also is part of the recipe for a happy family mealtime. Parents and other adults should try to avoid making mealtime a disciplinary occasion when children are reprimanded or given lectures. Instead, save such conversations for a time away from the dinner table, and focus instead on being together in a positive way.

A **family-centered** mealtime means limiting distractions, especially the TV or computer. Turn such things off at mealtime and use strategies to engage each family member in conversation.

For Families

Sharing family meals provides a multitude of benefits to families as a whole. Few family experiences offer such a wide range of benefits through such a simple activity. A few of the many benefits that research has documented that occur for families through sharing family meals are:

- Family meals provide a sense of family unity and identity. Family meals become a vehicle for carrying on valued family traditions, such as having a particularly favorite dish on someone's birthday or going to a favorite place to eat together on special occasions.
- Family meals give the opportunity to transmit the values and attitudes of a family from one generation to the next. Children can learn from parents and grandparents about what values are important to the family. Also, family meals are a wonderful

way to link family members with their cultural and ethnic heritage, as differing foods may reflect the unique cultural traditions or ethnic tastes of a particular family's background.

- Family meals also furnish a means for daily communication and strengthening family connections. Conversation around the dinner table allows give and take among family members and the chance to cultivate attitudes of patience and respect in communication.
- Family meals give a meaningful opportunity for family members to spend time together and enjoy one another's company in a relaxed setting. Families should consider how to maximize the time they have together by encouraging positive comments, adjusting meal experiences to the family's needs, and creating a warm and relaxed setting.

For Children

In addition to the benefits that come to families, children are helped in a variety of specific ways

Benefits of Family Meals

More individuals think that family meals are highly important than you might expect. While some people think that the family meal is dying away, that does not seem to be true. In two different studies, 79 percent of teenagers indicated that they very much enjoyed eating meals together with their family. Also, an additional 64 percent of teens said eating at least one meal together each day as a family was very important. Further, 98 percent of parents agreed that having their family eat together at least once a day was important. **Ninety-eight percent!**

when families share regular meals together. In fact, the range of areas in a child's life that research has found are positively influenced by sharing family meals is remarkable. Who would

have thought that family meals affect everything from childhood obesity to suicidal thinking to development of language abilities? A few of the many benefits that occur for children through sharing family meals are:

- Family meals allow parents an opportunity to be aware of and monitor their children's moods, behaviors

(continued)



and activities with friends. This kind of parental monitoring is important for parents to be able to know what their kids are doing, who they are with, and where and when their activities are taking place.

- Family meals give regular structure and routine to a child's day. If a child knows that he or she can expect a reliable schedule, it increases his or her sense of security and improves well-being.
- Family meals make a positive impact on young children's language acquisition and literacy development. Family meals furnish a daily opportunity for a parent or sibling to speak to an infant or toddler, and help them learn words, understand language and build conversation.
- Finally, a striking number of studies give specific and wide-ranging evidence that family meals are an important "protective factor" in the lives of children and teenagers. Family meals are associated with a variety of positive outcomes that improve child well-being. These in-

clude a decreased risk of substance use or delinquency, heightened personal and social well-being, and better academic performance.

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For Health

Another area of benefits that accrue to families through sharing meals is family health. Families who regularly eat together tend to be more healthful in their eating habits and have healthier outcomes. For example, some of the benefits that impact family health through sharing family meals are:

- Family meals furnish a meaningful opportunity to provide a role model for healthy eating. Parents and other adults can help model eating moderate portion sizes, tasting new foods or stopping when full. Also, they can use family mealtimes to encourage courtesy and other social manners that are valued in society.

- Family meals are associated with improved dietary intake among family members. For example, several large studies have shown that regular

family meals are strongly associated with increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, grains and other healthy food choices while also linked with lesser consumption of fried or fatty foods, soft drinks or other less healthy food choices.

- Recent research suggests that family meals are associated with a reduced risk of childhood obesity in children and adolescents.

Enjoy Family Mealtimes

Mary Story and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, two well-known researchers on family meals, make the case that family meals really do matter and bestow a whole range of benefits on family members. They advocate the following:

"Families should be encouraged to make the family meal more of a priority and to try to have at least four family meals per week. It is often easiest for families to eat dinner together, but other mealtimes work as well. Meals can be simple with shared mealtime responsibility among family members. Teaching children the enjoyment of cooking and having them involved in mealtime preparation develop skills they can use for a lifetime. Shared meals can also be extended to friends and neighbors to build a stronger sense of community and help with meal preparation. ... Regular family meals are key components of family life that may make a difference in the lives of children and parents."

(Story, M., and Neumark-Sztainer, D. A perspective on family meals: Do they matter? *Nutrition Today*, 40 (6), 261-266; 2005 .)

