

The Family Dinner Table: Information for Children's Health and Wellbeing



Why Does This Matter?

The average family meal lasts barely 20 minutes, but few other settings in family life have such potential to influence children's behavior and development. Sharing a meal regularly, research suggests, can boost children's health and wellbeing, reducing the likelihood that they'll become obese or use drugs, and increase the chances that they'll do well in school.

What the Research Says

Research on family mealtimes tells us that:

- Regular mealtimes have a protective effect on children. Teens who eat five or more meals a week with their families are less likely to smoke cigarettes or marijuana and to abuse alcohol.
- Children who take part in regular family mealtimes have more vocabulary growth and academic achievement than those who don't.
- Frequently shared mealtimes protect against obesity in children and eating disorders in preteens.
- In families with young children, eating together means fewer behavior problems.
- While it's unclear exactly how frequent family mealtimes improve children's health outcomes, families that regularly dine with their teens tend to eat more fruits and vegetables. Meals prepared at home also tend to be lower in calories and fat than restaurant meals.
- Various studies have characterized three to five meals a week as regular, but no magic number ensures healthy outcomes.
- Watching TV while eating disrupts mealtime patterns that may support children's health and has been linked to obesity in children.

Facts at a Glance

On average, about 50 percent of American families say they eat together three to five times a week, with younger children participating in family mealtimes more regularly than older children and poorer families reporting less frequent family mealtimes.

- Most family meals last, on average, 18 to 20 minutes.
- Families are busy juggling the needs of work, school, exercise, and after-school activities. When families have to make an effort to create healthy meals, they are likely to choose convenience, which, because it is often less healthy, is not always best for children.
- Almost half (46%) of families have a TV in the area where they eat.
- Over the past 25 years, the percent of American food dollars spent on foods away from home has grown from approximately 26% to over 40%; 93% of kids' meals are too high in calories for children.
- Food advertising is the second-largest advertising industry in the United States. In 2006, the food and beverage industry spent \$1.6 billion marketing to children and teens. Of this, \$870 million was spent on ads geared to children under 12.

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Individuals at all levels – from federal, state, and local governments to businesses, the community, and parents – can take steps to educate families about the benefits of family mealtimes for children and adolescents.