Family Meals

Children in poorer families, and those whose parents had less education, are more likely to have meals together with their families than are children with wealthier or more educated parents.

Importance

Family meals are an important opportunity to develop strong parent-child relationships and family connectedness.[1],[2],[3] Indeed, preparing and eating meals together have long been important rituals in many cultures,[4] and these activities continue to be important in communicating culture and values to children.[5] As children grow older and become more independent during adolescence, however, they tend to spend less time with the family and eat more meals away from the home. Teens cite reasons such as a desire for autonomy, conflicting schedules, a dislike of the food served, and dissatisfaction with family relations, while parents cite conflicting schedules and being busy.[6] However, participating in family meals can encourage positive behavior and improved physical and mental health.[7]

Like other forms of parental involvement, frequent family meals are associated with positive behavioral outcomes for both children and teens.[8],[9],[10] Teens who regularly have meals with their families are less likely to get into fights, think about suicide, smoke, drink, and use drugs,[11] and are more likely to have later initiation of sexual activity, and better academic performance, than teens who do not.[12],[13] Even after controlling for other forms of family connectedness,[1] frequent family meals are associated with less substance use, fewer depressive symptoms, fewer suicidal ideations, and better grades.[14] Children under 13 have fewer problem behaviors overall, as well as fewer externalizing (acting out) problems when they have more frequent family meals.[15]

Eating with parents is also an important positive influence on the nutrition and eating habits of adolescents. Research shows that parental presence at meals is associated with higher intake of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, as well as lower risk for being overweight for adolescent girls.[16],[17],[18],[19],[20] Adolescentsâ€™ especially...
Adolescents—especially girls—who reported frequent and structured family meals and a positive atmosphere at family meals, according to one study, were less likely to have eating disorders. Other research found that girls in families who eat meals together regularly are less likely to have disordered eating habits, even when taking into account previous factors, such as demographic characteristics, body-mass index, family connectedness, parental encouragement to diet, and extreme weight-control behaviors.

[i] Family connectedness was measured by the following questions: How much do you feel your [mother, father] cares about you? and Do you feel you can talk to your [mother, father] about your problems?

Trends

There were no significant changes between 2003 and 2011/12 in the proportions of children ages six to 11 or 12 to 17 who ate meals with their families zero to three days a week, four to five days a week, or six to seven days a week. (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2)

Differences by Race and Hispanic Origin

Hispanic and other race adolescents ages 12 to 17 are more likely than white and black adolescents to eat meals six to seven days a week together with their families. In 2011/12, 49 percent of Hispanic and 46 percent of other race adolescents ate meals six to seven days a week with their family, compared with 37 percent of black and 38 percent of white adolescents. Black adolescents were more likely to eat with their families fewer than four
days a week (39 percent, compared with less than 29 percent among adolescents in the other race/ethnicity categories). (Figure 1)

Among children ages 6 to 11, the pattern is similar, except that black children are less likely than their white counterparts to eat meals with their family at least six times a week. In 2011/12, 58 percent of “other race” and 59 percent of Hispanic children in this age group ate meals six to seven days a week with their family, compared with 53 percent of white children, and 46 percent of black children. (Appendix 2)

Differences by Nativity

Foreign-born adolescents are more likely than both native-born adolescents with foreign-born parents and native-born adolescents with native-born parents to eat family meals together regularly (52, 49, and 36 percent, respectively in 2007, the latest data available). Between 2003 and 2007, the proportion of foreign-born adolescents who ate meals together with their families six or seven times a week decreased significantly. (Figure 2)

Differences by Age
Older adolescents are less likely than younger adolescents and children to eat meals six or seven days a week with their family. In 2011/12, 35 percent of adolescents ages 15 to 17 ate six or seven meals a week with their family, compared with 46 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 14, and 54 percent of children ages 6 to 11. (Figure 3)

Differences by Poverty Level

Adolescents living below the poverty level are more likely to eat meals together as a family six to seven days a week than are those living with incomes between 101 and 200 percent of the federal poverty level, or those above 200 percent of the federal poverty level. For instance, in 2011/12, 51 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds in a family living at the poverty level or
below, 43 percent of those living between 101 and 200 percent of poverty, and 36 percent of those above 200 percent of poverty ate meals more than five days a week with their families. However, adolescents living in families between 101 and 200 percent of poverty were more likely than their peers to eat with their families fewer than four times a week (32 percent, compared with 28 percent of poorer adolescents, and 29 percent of more affluent ones). (Figure 4)

Among children ages six to eleven, those living in families with incomes above 200 percent of the poverty line were more likely to eat with their families fewer than four times a week (20 percent, compared with 17 and 19 percent of poor and near-poor children, respectively). (Appendix 2)

**Differences by Parental Education[24]**

Children and adolescents whose parents have less than a high school degree are more likely than those with parents who have more education to eat meals six or seven days a week with their family. For example, among 12- to 17-year-olds in 2011/12, the proportion of those eating meals together six to seven days a week was 53 percent in families where neither parent completed high school, compared with 44 and 37 percent, respectively, for families where parents had a high school education only, or more than a high school education. However, those with a parent with a high school degree and those with more education were equally likely to eat with their family fewer than four times a week. (Appendix 1)

**State and Local Estimates**

2003, 2007 and 2011/12 state estimates for number of days family members in a household ate a meal together are available through the National Survey of Childrenâ€™s Health at the Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health. (Select Family Health and Activities under Child Health Measures).

**International Estimates**

None available.

**National Goals**
None.

Related Indicators

- Reading to Young Children
- Disordered Eating: Symptoms of Bulimia
- Regular Bedtime And Mealtime (archived)
- Parental Warmth and Affection (archived)

Definition

This indicator is based on the question, "During the past week, on how many days did all the family members who live in the household eat a meal together?"

Data Source

Child Trends' original analyses of data from the National Survey of Children's Health.

Raw Data Source

National Survey of Children's Health http://childhealthdata.org/learn/NSCH

Appendix 1 - Percentage of Adolescents Ages 12 to 17 who Ate Meals with Their Family, by Number of Days Meals were Eaten Together, 2003, 2007, and 2011/2012

Appendix 2 - Percentage of Children Ages 6 to 11 who Ate Meals with Their Family, by Number of Days Meals were Eaten Together, 2003, 2007, and 2011/2012
Endnotes


Correlations between family meals and psychosocial well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 158*, 792-796.


Hispanics may be any race. Estimates for whites, blacks, and others do not include
Hispanics.

[24]Parental education refers to the parent with the highest education.

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