



Pasta or Chicken Tonight?

OVER THE YEARS THE FAMILY DINNER has become, for some families, a relic of the past. All families juggle multiple schedules filled with after-school activities, events and work. But before dinners go the way of eight-track tapes, parents should consider the important findings of a number of psychological studies.

Results from these studies consistently indicate that children and adolescents who eat dinner with their families have better nutrition and better language and literacy skills. They experience less disordered eating patterns and engage in fewer risky behaviors. Specifically, these children and teenagers are more likely to have higher grade point averages and are less likely to abuse prescription or illegal drugs, smoke or have symptoms of depression.

What is even more interesting is that these results are obtained after controlling for family connectedness (Eisenberg, Olsen, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and Bearinger, 2004). What does this mean? It means that regardless of a family's *feelings* of connectedness, sitting down to eat dinner together was the specific thing that was good for the children. Some studies also indicate that even if only one parent is

present and even if dinner is eaten together only a few times a week, the benefits appear to hold steady.

Researchers are quick to note that the relationship between family dinners and positive outcomes is a correlational relationship. In other words, eating dinner does not cause more positive outcomes; rather, its existence reflects that a strong relationship exists. So why might dinners together be good for a family? Some researchers theorize that the underlying positive factor is related to family organization (it sure takes a lot of organization to pull dinners off!). Others theorize that it is the priority and importance placed on the ritual of family dinners that protects and benefits children. Finally, researchers also note that the conversations that take place during the meal help increase vocabulary and speech development.

Regardless of what specific factors are at play, eating dinner together as a family either once, twice or three times during a week is something that is clearly beneficial for children and adolescents. Orchestrating the family dinner, however, can prove a challenge. The experts even offer some suggestions. For example, it's important to make sure that

an actual dining space exists. Unfortunately a table covered with work papers and school projects is not conducive to eating spaghetti with sauce.

Additionally, given family members' varied activities and different schedules, using a family calendar to track activities and plan those dinners will help. Also, some prior thought is needed regarding what food will be prepared, what ingredients are needed and available, and which need to be purchased.

Last, researchers suggest that all family members should be required to attend, positive attitude or not. A surly teenager is better than no teenager. Also, once everyone is together, turn the television off. The dinner conversation should be what captures everyone's attention. Finally, try to keep the conversation positive and avoid touchy subjects that should be handled in a more private manner.

So, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, set the table and enjoy your family! It's actually good for them!

EDITOR'S NOTE: Aranda is a licensed psychologist (#PY5983) who specializes in psychological assessments and child and adolescent therapy. More information about her can be found at www.helpingtampafamilies.com.

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