

DON'T WASTE YOUR FAMILY MEAL

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Source: <http://cbmw.org/topics/fatherhood/fatherhood-and-the-worlds-it-creates/>

Did you know there's one simple thing you can do in your home that can ensure your kids will be less likely to become overweight or obese, more likely to stay away from cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and illicit drugs? Not only that, but also, if you do this one simple thing, it will likely improve their grades, you and your kids will talk more, you'll be more likely to hear about a serious problem early on, and there will be less stress and tension at home.

These are the benefits [numerous studies](#) link to regular family mealtime. It's amazing that something about corralling a family around a table a few times a week to simultaneously eat a plate of spaghetti, a bowl of chili, a collection of chicken fingers or other dish can have dramatic effects on health, eating disorders, substance abuse, academic performance, and parent-child harmony.

But why? If you're among those who regularly eat at least 5 meals together per week as a family, what are you doing that accrues all those benefits? Are you giving tips on portion control? Are you showing scare videos about drugs or tobacco use? Are you doing pop quizzes at dinner to keep your kids on their academic toes? Do you bring in a counselor to sit at the table with you to help you resolve tension or do you lead your family in breathing exercises to reduce stress?

What's the secret?

How can so many positive things happen around a dinner table? Many of the same studies that identify the benefits of family meals try to discern what it is about eating together that causes those benefits. An article from the University of North Dakota summarizes many of the primary factors.

Awareness:

FAMILY MEALS ALLOW PARENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE AWARE OF AND MONITOR THEIR CHILDREN'S MOODS, BEHAVIORS 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.

Structure:

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.

Language and literacy development:

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.

Protection:

... 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 INCLUDE A DECREASED RISK OF SUBSTANCE USE OR DELINQUENCY, HEIGHTENED PERSONAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING, AND BETTER ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE.

Modeling of healthy eating:

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.

Theodore Dalrymple, a British physician, made similar points in a haunting way in a [Wall Street Journal article](#) where he observed the connection between obesity among the poor and the loss of family meal rituals:

FOR MUCH OF THE POPULATION, FAMILY MEALS ARE A RITUAL OF THE PAST: THIRTY-SIX PERCENT OF BRITISH CHILDREN NEVER EAT A MEAL AT A TABLE WITH ANOTHER MEMBER OF THEIR FAMILY OR HOUSEHOLD (WE HAVE NOW PASSED THE MILESTONE LONG DESIRED BY RADICAL SOCIAL REFORMERS, MORE CHILDREN BEING BORN ILLEGITIMATE THAN LEGITIMATE). IN THE HOMES OF THE POOR, THE UNEMPLOYED AND THE SINGLE PARENTS THAT I USED TO VISIT AS A DOCTOR, I WOULD FIND NO EVIDENCE OF COOKING EVER HAVING BEEN DONE THERE. FATTY TAKE-AWAY MEALS AND READY-

PREPARED FOODS HEATED IN THE MICROWAVE WERE THE DIET, TOGETHER WITH ALMOST CONSTANT SNACKS. THERE WAS NOT EVEN A TABLE TO EAT AT: AN ABSENCE THAT WAS NOT THE CONSEQUENCE OF RAW POVERTY, SINCE THE FLAT-SCREEN TELEVISION WOULD HAVE BEEN LARGE ENOUGH, TURNED HORIZONTAL, TO SERVE AS A DINING TABLE.

IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, CHILDREN GRAZE OR FORAGE; BUT UNLIKE PREVIOUS HUNTER GATHERERS, THEY DO NOT COME UP AGAINST A SCARCITY OF FOOD, BUT RATHER A SURFEIT OF IT. NOTHING IS EASIER FOR THEM THAN TO OVERINDULGE, AND THE APPETITE GROWS WITH THE FEEDING. THEIR TASTES NEVER DEVELOP BEYOND THE MOST INSTANTLY GRATIFYING TYPES OF FOOD, SUGARY AND FATTY, AND THEY EAT LIKE CHILDREN FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES; THEY NEVER LEARN THE DISCIPLINE OF SUBORDINATING THEIR APPETITE TO THE EXIGENCIES OF FAMILY LIFE AND SOCIAL CONVENTION. THEY ARE LIKE POOH BEAR, FOR WHOM IT IS ALWAYS TIME FOR A LITTLE SOMETHING. IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING IF, LIKE POOH BEAR'S, THEIR WAISTLINES EXPAND UNTIL THEY CAN'T FIT INTO A NORMAL SEAT.

He ends with this insight of one of the primary lessons of family meals:

FAMILY AND SOCIAL MEALS ARE AMONG THE MOST POWERFUL TEACHERS OF SELF-CONTROL IN THE HUMAN REPERTOIRE. THEY TEACH THAT THE APPETITE OF THE MOMENT IS NOT, OR RATHER OUGHT NOT TO BE, THE SOLE DETERMINANT OF ONE'S BEHAVIOR. THE PATTERN OF GRAZING OR FORAGING INDEPENDENTLY OF EVERYONE ELSE TEACHES PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE LESSON. IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING THAT THOSE WHO DO NOT EXPERIENCE FAMILY OR SOCIAL MEALS EARLY IN LIFE EXHIBIT THE LACK OF SELF-CONTROL THAT UNDERLIES SO MUCH MODERN SOCIAL PATHOLOGY IN THE MIDST OF PLENTY.

How should we then eat? (That's the question we'll tackle in part 2 of "Don't Waste Your Family Meal.")