



It's time for dinner

The Effect Of Regular Family Dinners On Family Life

Report to Family First New Zealand 2018

FAMILY
FIRST
NEW ZEALAND

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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From 2002 - 2006 he was breakfast / talkback host on the Rhema Broadcasting nationwide radio programme and television presenter on their current affairs show *N-Zone Focus*. In 2006, he established Family First New Zealand.

Bob McCoskrie wrote the report *Defying Human Nature: An Analysis of New Zealand's 2007 Anti-Smacking Law* (2016) and was a contributor to *21 Reasons Why Marriage Matters* (2009). He has also had articles published in the *NZ Herald*, *Dominion Post*, *Christchurch Press*, *Otago Daily Times*, *Newshub* website, and in community newspapers throughout New Zealand.

He lives in South Auckland, is married and has three children.

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ABOUT FAMILY FIRST NZ

Family First NZ is a charitable organisation formed in 2006, and registered as a charity with the Charities Commission. Its purposes and aims are:

- to promote and advance research and policy regarding family and marriage
- to participate in social analysis and debate surrounding issues relating to and affecting the family
- to educate the public in their understanding of the institutional, legal and moral framework that makes a just and democratic society possible
- to produce and publish relevant and stimulating material in newspapers, magazines, and other media relating to issues affecting families
- to speak up about issues relating to families that are in the public domain

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ENDORSEMENTS

"Sometimes the most important things are right under our nose. In this paper Bob McCoskrie has given us a timely reminder of why the social capital, which is handed on through daily debriefing and conversation around the dinner table, is so important. By highlighting the human need for acceptance, learning and progress, the paper shows how generational wisdom and perspective, communicated through the family, will promote educational capital as well as emotional health that is likely to prevent a myriad of mental health problems."

IAN & MARY GRANT: Ian and Mary are high-profile parenting and relationship gurus in New Zealand. They have written a series of bestselling parenting books, including *Growing Great Boys*, *Growing Great Girls*, *Growing Great Marriages*, *Growing Great Families*, *Communicate* and *Fathers Who Dare Win*. In 1993 Ian and his wife Mary established *Parenting with Confidence Inc.* (now *The Parenting Place*), the first resource centre for parents in New Zealand. More recently, Mary set up *Faith4Families* and Ian founded *Fathers Who Dare Win*. Mary was awarded the Queen Elizabeth Medal for Services to Youth in 1990. Ian was awarded the Companion of the Queens Service Order in 2009 and was the Senior New Zealander of the Year in 2013.

"Dinner may be the one time of the day when a parent-child can share a positive experience. As human beings our first heart's desire is to be connected to each other. Family dinner time with my husband and our 4 young boys has become an important training ground for raising our sons into mighty men of integrity and valor – through food and social connection. What matters to them is that we 'show up' and be 'present'. Thank you Family First for another brilliant report that is simple to read and understand, providing simple tools to equip parents to positively shape children and strengthen their families. This can only be a good thing for New Zealand."

RACHEL AFEAKI-TAUMOEPEAU: Rachel is Trust Manager of *ForThe Sake Of Our Children Trust* raising the awareness of child abuse and neglect across NZ. She directed a Pacific Mentoring youth agency located in Auckland for its initial four years, and mentors emerging young leaders particularly within the Pacific communities. She speaks regularly on Pacific social and economic issues. She is also the Vice Chair for the New Zealand Tonga Business Council, encouraging bilateral trade in the region whilst providing social advisory for a significant residential housing development in South Auckland. She enjoys being a mum to four young sons with her husband, scientist Alekisanita Taumoepeau.

"When families eat together, good things happen. This is no mere opinion: there is now a stack of excellent studies that correlate family dining habits with school performance, drug and alcohol use, mental health, nutrition, sexual behaviour and raft of other measures. The results overwhelmingly support the idea that regular mealtimes together as a family are linked to positive, healthier outcomes for children. Family First is to be commended for their excellent work in commissioning New Zealand research on meal times, and then compiling it with other New Zealand studies and international research. The paper also explores what factors lie behind the observed benefits, and why some families find it hard to have meals together. The research is so unambiguous that Family First is completely right to advocate mealtimes as a key feature of good family life. I support them in that entirely."

JOHN COWAN: John worked as a writer, educator and researcher for *The Parenting Place* for more than twenty years. As well as presenting parenting and relationship seminars, John has developed a life skills programme base for secondary school students, a puberty programme for intermediate schools, and has been integral in developing *The Parenting Show with Pio*. John has six weekly radio slots including hosting *Real Life with John Cowan* on *NewstalkZB* and the *Parenting Panel* on *RadioLIVE*. He is also a frequent guest on TVNZ's *Breakfast* and TV3's *The Café*. A father of three young adults, John has a varied background – scientist, youth worker, minister, media producer and social worker in mental health.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2018, an independent poll of 1000 New Zealanders found that 88% believed that dinners together on a regular basis were important, with two out of three (67%) saying they were “very important”. Families in low socio-economic areas placed less emphasis on the importance of the regular meal together. 80% of women said family dinners were very important, but only 55% of men.

However, when respondents were asked how often they were *actually* sitting down together for dinner, only 56% said they had dinner together at least five nights a week (5-7 nights). 21% were sitting down together three nights or less.

28% of families *with children* were eating together every night, with a further 39% managing 5-6 nights per week.

Significantly, families in high deprivation areas were not sitting down for dinner together very often, which may not be surprising given that they were more likely to say they aren't ‘important’. There may of course be other factors at play, such as cost, shift-work, time constraints, and even living arrangements (for example, a physical lack of room for a dinner table and enough chairs, or an inability to afford the appropriate furniture).

Are Kiwi families committed to, and even excited by, the concept of regular family dinners together? Does it even matter? The polling above suggests that we *like* the concept, but actually *making it happen* can be challenging.

Should families try harder? What are the benefits of sitting down to have dinner together on a regular basis? Is there a ‘magic’ that takes place which doesn’t happen during other family events or day-to-day routines? What factors affect or limit the frequency of family dinners?

Does dinner make a strong family, or does a strong family make dinner? This is a topic that touches all families, and we hope this paper will provoke much conversation.

This report looks at the research and trends on this issue from both New Zealand and overseas, and asks a simple question – should we do more to promote and encourage families to have dinners together on a regular basis?

The evidence appears strong: regular family dinners have a positive and protective effect which benefits families, and especially young people. The ‘magic’ appears to be not around the food, but around the family engagement, the conversations, the strengthening of family bonds, and importantly, the role in helping children deal with the pressures of adolescence and peer pressure.

Some of the benefits found by researchers relate to:

- WELL-BEING – family dinners appear to facilitate open communication in families, and present opportunities for children to discuss social and emotional issues and coping strategies. They provide a formal or informal ‘check-in’ time during which parents can tune in to the emotional wellbeing of their teens. Girls in particular benefit from this.
- RISK-TAKING – a Families Commission report in 2011 said that teenagers who frequently ate with their families were less likely to report suicidal thoughts, binge drinking, smoking and marijuana use. This was backed up by international research, which suggested that family meals provide important opportunities for parents to communicate clear expectations about behaviour and family values. Family meals may also reduce the time that could potentially either be spent in solitary experimentation

We like the concept, but actually making it happen can be challenging.



Does dinner make a strong family, or does a strong family make dinner?

The ‘magic’ appears to be not around the food, but around the family engagement, the conversations, the strengthening of family bonds.

with addictive substances, or with peers who are a 'bad influence' on the adolescent.

- **TEEN SEXUAL ACTIVITY** – researchers found that the more times a week adolescents reported having dinner with their family, “doing something religious” as a family, or having fun with their family, the less likely they would engage in sexual activity or risky sexual behaviour.
- **NUTRITION** – the frequency of family meals is associated with many positive aspects of home food environment and positive nutrition behaviours, including parental support for healthy eating, having fruit available at home, consuming five fruits and vegetables a day, eating breakfast, and bringing lunch from home to school. Eating together as a family means that parents can better control the food that is served during meals and monitor their children’s food choices, recognising early signs of eating disorders or bad habits, and being better able to intervene. It is also argued that the presence of TV *negatively* affects the dietary healthfulness and emotional atmosphere of the meal.
- **OBESITY** – eating together enables the parent to have better knowledge and control of the child’s food choices and portion sizes.
- **PREVENTING EATING DISORDERS** – making family meals a priority, in spite of scheduling difficulties, emerged as the most consistent protective factor for disordered eating – especially for girls. Researchers argue that the connectedness which happens through regular family dinners builds self-esteem and a sense of worth, and that this works actively against someone developing an eating disorder. However, this benefit can be negated if there are high levels of weight and body talk, and weight-based teasing.
- **STABILISING ROUTINE** – routines may protect children from some of the risks associated with being raised in a 'non-traditional' family (for example, the absence of two parents in the home who can share the load). Researchers also noted that single parents spend the least amount of time eating with their children and have fewer commensal meals due to time pressures.
- **CYBERBULLYING VICTIMISATION** – research suggests that more frequent dinners facilitate parental guidance and support, open communication with parents and siblings, and opportunities for adolescents to express problems and concerns as they arise.
- **TECHNOLOGY** – there is a clear warning about the effect of television and technology becoming the center of attention and conversation for the meal. Experts also warn that screen engagement may prevent our brains from subconsciously memorising what we’re currently eating – potentially a key aspect of appetite regulation. Conversely, adolescents unhappy with family relationships may be more likely to participate in family meals if the TV is on and conversation isn’t the main focus.

Despite the many studies which point to various benefits of regular family dinners, there have been some studies that suggest there is no benefit. This is based on the hypothesis that family dinners are part and parcel of a broader package of practices, routines, and rituals that reflect parenting beliefs and priorities, and that all the positive outcomes listed above may simply be a proxy for other, more effective, dimensions of the family environment – for example, families with both biological parents present, a non-employed mother, and a higher income.

Deprivation is also a significant factor. Studies have shown that lower-income families can lack time and energy to prepare and arrange meals together, and

Family meals provide important opportunities for parents to communicate clear expectations about behaviour and family values.



More frequent dinners facilitate opportunities for adolescents to express problems and concerns as they arise.

The presence of TV negatively affects the dietary healthfulness and emotional atmosphere of the meal.

that this is exacerbated by shift-work. Snacking and fast-food outlets can be used as a coping strategy.

Surveys suggest that most parents and young people have a positive view about having dinner together as a family. When they 'work', they help make great memories and strengthen the bond of those present.

However, they can also be 'negative' experiences – when a family member is talking on the phone, distracted by a television programme, or engaged with an electronic device; when time is spent engaging in overly restrictive behaviours ("Eat your peas!", "Stop hitting your sister"); or when there are negative or critical forms of communication during the meal. It may not be enough to suggest that families eat together five or more times a week if they come prepared to criticise, control, or avoid conversation altogether.

The notion that family meals must be complicated or elaborate can also dissuade parents from engaging in this important activity.

In fact, it appears that the more often you do it – even the gathering over a simple quickly-prepared meal, accompanied by a 'serving' of conversation and 'topped' with care – the longer families are willing to spend time having dinner together.

Due to the overall findings of the research presented in this paper, we believe there should be a marketing campaign with online resources to encourage families to have dinner together as often as possible, taking into account work and school commitments, and extra-curricular activities. This campaign should include tips to help families prepare simple cost-effective meals, hints for keeping the mealtime as positive as possible, ways to involve children and teens in the meal planning and preparation, healthy eating options, and encouragement to turn off the TV and devices while at the table.

The emphasis should be on the importance of being together, not on creating a *My Kitchen Rules*-winning meal!

Parents may be keener to make the effort to plan for, prepare, and schedule family dinners if they are aware of the extent to which the whole process will benefit and protect their family in a number of ways.

The evidence is persuasive. When any family-based activity has the potential to help children deal with the pressures of adolescence and peer pressure, improve their well-being and nutrition, and strengthen family bonds, we should give it priority.

And when we add the potential of this activity to help decrease the likelihood of suicidal thoughts, binge drinking, smoking and marijuana use, sexual activity, obesity, and eating disorders, it seems a 'slam-dunk' that families should schedule as many dinners together during the week as possible – even when competing with busy work and school schedules.

For low-income and time-pressed families, the best encouragement we can give is to start small and intentionally. Even adding an extra night or two on the current weekly trend could make a noticeable difference to family life.

Don't make it about the food - make it about the family. It's worth the effort.

It's time for dinner.

Lower-income families can lack time and energy to prepare and arrange meals together, and this is exacerbated by shift work.

It may not be enough to suggest that families eat together five or more times a week if they come prepared to criticise, control, or avoid conversation altogether.



Don't make it about the food - make it about the family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Endorsements	4
Executive Summary	5
Table Of Contents.....	8
Introduction.....	9
Historically Speaking.....	10
How Are Kiwi Families Currently Doing?	11
International Surveys	12
New Zealand-Based Research.....	15
Analysing The Benefits	17
Well-Being	17
Cyberbullying Victimization	19
Risk-Taking.....	19
Teen Sexual Activity	21
Nutrition	22
Obesity	24
Preventing Eating Disorders.....	25
Brain Power	26
Dissenting Views	27
Family Cohesion.....	29
Family Structure.....	30
Part Of A Bigger Package.....	31
The Effect of Television And Technology.....	32
The Effect Of Deprivation.....	34
Workplace Factors	36
Other Obstacles	37
The View Of Families.....	38
The View Of Teens	39
Mothers Matter	40
Dads In The Kitchen	41
Quality vs. Quantity – Keeping It Positive	42
Length Of Family Dinners.....	43
Policy Recommendations: Strategies To Encourage Family Dinners	44
Conclusion	46
References.....	48

INTRODUCTION

In January 2018, an independent poll of 1000 New Zealanders undertaken by Curia Market Research, and commissioned by Family First NZ, found that 88% of respondents believed dinners together on a regular basis were important, with two out of three (67%) saying they were 'very important'.¹

In a significant gender split, 80% of women said they were very important but only 55% of men. Families in low socio-economic areas also placed less emphasis on the importance of the regular meal together.

Families *with children* were overwhelmingly in support, with 98% of respondents in these households convinced of their importance. Based on political allegiance, Green party voters were the most convinced of the importance of family dinners.

However, when respondents were asked how often they were *actually* sitting down together for dinner, only 56% said they had dinner together *at least* five nights a week (5-7 nights). 10% were meeting six nights per week, and 29% were having dinner together every night of the week. 21% of the respondents were sitting down together only three nights or less.

28% of families *with children* were eating together every night, with a further 39% managing 5-6 nights per week (i.e. 2/3rds of 'partner and kids' households ate together at least five nights per week).

Significantly, families in high deprivation areas weren't sitting down for dinner together as often, which may not be surprising given that they are more likely to say regular family dinners aren't 'important'. There may of course be other factors at play, such as cost, shift-work and time constraints.

In the coverage of the poll by the *NZ Herald*, Auckland mother-of-two Ketina Chivasa was profiled:

"She treated family dinners like a second school – her kids learn to cook, learn about manners, to set the table and learn about their cultural roots in Zimbabwe. It's a device-free event with no phones to be seen, and provides precious-quality time for the family. 'For me the dinner starts from making it. We get to make it together. By taking part in cooking with me they become more interested in the food. Then we just talk. I've been amazed by how many things I've learnt about my kids and what's happening, even issues like bullying in school. It's a bonding time. It's very special. So much comes from just sitting in the same room.' Despite a busy life, having dinner together is not a difficult choice for Chivasa. 'You can be a single mum, but what are your priorities? I prioritise the children. The free time I have I spend it with my kids. Your kids have to be a part of your day somehow and dinner time is the best time..."

*"Tatenda Chivasa, 12, agreed with her mum that family dinners were important. 'It's time to spend with your family. It's a chance if you guys are all busy. It's a way to build your relationships every day. It's fun, we're laughing and enjoying and eating. I love doing the cooking but it gets a bit messy.'"*²

But are families as committed to, and excited by, the concept of regular family dinners together. Does it even matter? The research above suggests that we *like* the concept, but actually *making it happen* can be challenging.



88% of respondents said that dinners together on a regular basis were important.

Only 56% said they have dinner together at least five nights a week.

Families in high deprivation areas weren't sitting down for dinner together as often.

1 Curia Market Research. Family Dinner Poll. December 2017, <https://www.familyfirst.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Family-Dinner-Poll-Results-Dec-2017.pdf>

2 Poll shows Kiwis value family dinners, NZ Herald, 3 Jan 2018, <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/index.cfm?objectid=11968686&ref=twitter>

Should families try harder? And just what are the benefits of sitting together to have dinner together? Is there a 'magic' that takes place which doesn't happen at other family events?

Is there any truth to the notion that "the family which eats together stays together"?

This paper looks at the research and trends on this issue from both New Zealand and overseas, and asks a simple question – should we do more to promote and encourage families to have dinners together on a regular basis?

Historically Speaking

Humanity's love affair with dinner time has been documented for decades.

According to *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*:

*"In 1947 the government issued a series of photographs designed to attract British immigrants to New Zealand – including this image of the Evans family dining together in their Palmerston North state house. Father Jack Evans is at the head of the table, flanked by his two sons, Michael and John. His wife, Betty, is at left and his mother, Emma Evans, at right. A photograph of the first Labour prime minister, Michael Joseph Savage, hangs on the wall, a common sight in New Zealand households of this era."*³

The Ministry of Health, in a background paper entitled *Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Children and Young People (aged 2-18 years)*, originally released in 2012, said:

*"The dinner or evening meal has historically been the main meal of the day for New Zealanders. As such, it provides a significant proportion of daily energy and nutrient requirements. Traditionally dinner has also been the meal most families or whānau have together. Family/whānau meals still seem a reasonably regular activity for most New Zealand young people."*⁴

The attitude is prevalent in many countries around the world. In her cover story for *Cooking Light* in March 2015, Michelle Obama said:

*"My dad was a shift worker, so there were some dinner times when he was at work, but whenever he was there we would sit around the table with the plastic tablecloth, and that's when we would catch up and we'd talk about what we were eating, talk about what was going on in the day. And it's that tradition that Barack and I really try to incorporate in our lives, even though we're extremely busy in the White House. We've found that we've been able to have dinner every – almost every night together, between 6:30 and 7:00. We have a bigger table and somebody else is doing the cooking, but the conversation and the mood and the tone are still the same. It's our most important time of the day."*⁵

The article continued: *"With her own struggles as a young parent in mind, Mrs. Obama now aims to spark a national conversation about family dinner without making parents feel judged. 'We have to be deliberate about [getting back to home cooking traditions],' she says. 'It won't happen by accident. People are busier today. Life is different ... but we have to find those new healthier norms.'"*

Should we do more to promote and encourage families to have dinners together on a regular basis?



Source: Kerryn Pollock, 'Eating - Families and hospitality', *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*

Traditionally dinner has also been the meal most families or whānau have together.



Source: Ten Questions with Michelle Obama. *Cooking Light*. March 2015

3 Kerryn Pollock, 'Eating - Families and hospitality', *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/photograph/38606/a-family-meal-1947> (accessed 12 February 2018)

4 Ministry of Health. 2012. *Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Children and Young People (Aged 2–18 years)*: A background paper. Partial revision February 2015.

5 Ten Questions with Michelle Obama. *Cooking Light*. March 2015, <http://www.cookinglight.com/cooking-101/michelle-obama-interview>

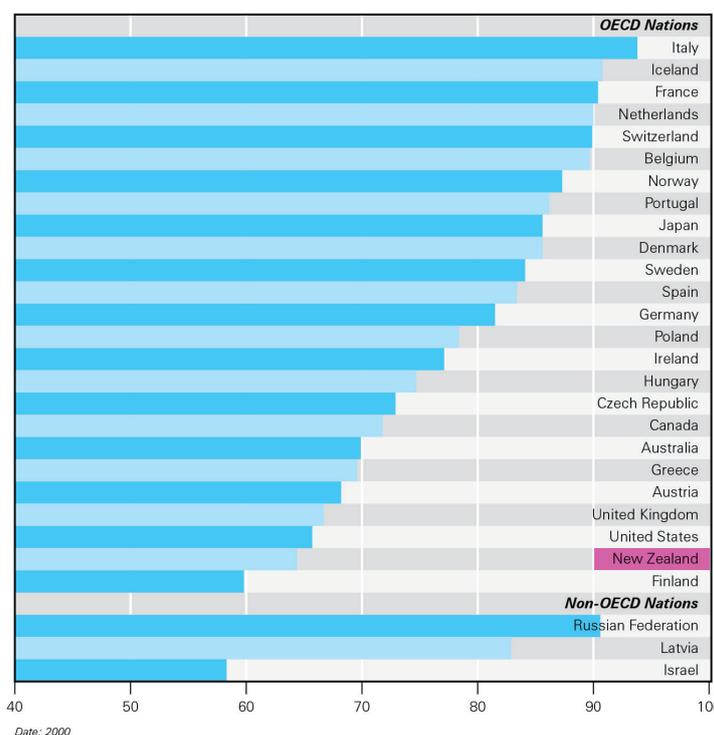
How Are Kiwi Families Currently Doing?

In 2007, UNICEF released their report *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*.⁶ The report included a section entitled "Family Relationships" where all OECD countries were rated according to the percentage of children who reported eating the main meal of the day with their parents. As you can see in the graph below, New Zealand got a very low score compared with other OECD countries.

"People are busier today. Life is different ... but we have to find those new healthier norms."

Michelle Obama

Percentage of 15 year-olds who eat the main meal with their parents 'several times per week'



Source: UNICEF, *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7, 2007

It is significant that UNICEF linked the issues of child poverty with whether the families were regularly having meals together. We discuss the issue of child poverty and deprivation later in the paper.

The *Youth '07 Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand* report released in 2008 surveyed 9107 secondary school students across the country and found that "just over half the students reported that their family ate meals together on 5 or more days in the past week"⁷, consistent with the polling released in January of this year (56% – mentioned on page 9).

In the follow-up report in 2012, a slightly-improved 62% of students reported that their family ate meals together five or more times in the past week.⁸ Students from lower deprivation neighbourhoods were more likely to eat family meals together (66%) than students from higher deprivation neighbourhoods (58%), once again consistent with the polling mentioned on page 9.

A study of young people in South Auckland, published in 2008 as part of the *Pacific Obesity Prevention In Communities* study, found that only 42% of young

It is significant that UNICEF linked the issues of child poverty with whether the families were regularly having meals together.

⁶ UNICEF, *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7, 2007

⁷ Youth '07: The Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand. Adolescent Health Research Group, (2008). Initial Findings. Auckland: The University of Auckland

⁸ Youth '12: The Health and Wellbeing of New Zealand Secondary School Students in 2012. Adolescent Health Research Group, (2012). Initial Findings. Auckland: The University of Auckland

people ate meals with their families on all of the previous five school nights.⁹ However, this was a survey of young people in low socio-economic areas (see further discussion of the study later in this paper).

The Families Commission – a Crown entity established under the Families Commission Act 2003 and now called the *Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (SUPERU)* – used the data obtained in the *Youth '07 Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand* to release a significant report in 2011 entitled *Eating together at mealtimes: the role of family meals in the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand*.¹⁰ The findings – which are very positive towards the role of eating dinner together often – are covered in detail later in this report.

In 2011, the *Sunday Star Times* newspaper did an online poll asking the question, "How frequently in a normal week would you sit at the table and eat dinner together as a family?" 59% said five or more days per week – once again consistent with previous polling (image top-right).

However, an online poll of 515 *Food* magazine readers in 2012 found that half of New Zealanders eat dinner *in front of the television* three or more nights a week – a quarter admitting to the habit every night¹¹ (image middle-right).

In 2013, a *Herald-DigiPoll* survey found nearly half (47.5 per cent) of those questioned enjoyed dinner with family at least five times a week, 21.4 per cent said they "almost never" sat down at the family dinner table, while 15.6 per cent said they still found time once or twice a week to share dinner with family.¹²

An accompanying (unscientific) online poll found a more favourable response with 71% of the 10,000+ respondents saying they ate dinner together 5-7 nights per week (image bottom-right).



Source: *Sunday Star Times*. 2011

Dinners in front of TV

● Number of times per week



Never	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	Every night
22.6%	26.5%	14.8%	13.2%	23%

Online survey of 515 *Food* magazine readers

Herald graphic

Source: *NZ Herald*. 17 September 2012

How often do you eat dinner with your family?

10000–10050 votes

Every night of the week. 53%

Five-six nights a week. 18%

Three-four nights a week. 9%

One-two nights a week. 9%

Never. 11%

Source: *NZ Herald website*. January 2013

International Surveys

US

The *Barilla Family Dinner Project* (*Barilla* are an international company specialising in pasta and sauces¹³) conducted an online survey of 1000 parents and 1000 children in 2010 with a sample recruited from a nationally representative panel.¹⁴ The researchers said:

"Survey data reveal that family time is a top priority for both parents (88%) and children (79%). Tweens are even more likely than teens to consider time spent connecting with family to be a priority, an important finding to note given the critical emotional and social development years tweens find themselves in. Three quarters (75%) of parents and six out of 10 kids (60%) wish they had more time to spend time together and connect as a family, and for nearly half (47%), busy schedules are the culprit that makes it harder for them to find that time."

9 Utter, J., et al; Relationships between frequency of family meals, BMI and nutritional aspects of the home food environment among New Zealand adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity* 2008, 5:50

10 Utter, J., Denny, S., Grant, S., Robinson, E., Ameratunga, S., Fleming, T.; *Eating together at mealtimes: the role of family meals in the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand* (2011). Families Commission Research Fund, Report No 6/11

11 TV dinners are bad for health, experts claim. *NZ Herald*. 17 September 2012, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10834494

12 Family meals becoming relic of past. *NZ Herald*. 14 January 2013, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=10858879

13 <https://int.barilla.com/>

14 Doherty, Dr. William. *Share the Table: Benefits of the Family Dinner for Parents and Children*, A White Paper Study, <http://www.sharethetable.com/docs/BenefitsOfTheFamilyDinnerWhitePaper.pdf>

The Harris Poll of 2368 US adults surveyed online in 2013 found that nearly six in ten (58%) report sitting down to meals together at least four times per week. However, 59% said their family today had fewer family dinners than when they were growing up.¹⁵ They also found that households *without* children were more likely to report sitting down to family dinners every night (36% without, 26% with), which they attributed to the likelihood that “today’s kids lead busy lives”. The researchers commented:

“It doesn’t seem to be attributable toward any negative feelings toward them – past or present. Over nine in ten (92%) family diners – those whose households sit down to one or more family dinners per week – describe them as something they look forward to, and eight in ten Americans (80%) have fond memories of their family dinners when they were growing up. Along similar lines, only 15% of diners say that family dinners stress them out, and fewer than two in ten Americans (19%) say they tried to get out of family dinners whenever they could when they were growing up.”

They also said: “Nine in ten (90%) say that the family eating together is more important than where the food comes from, yet seven in ten (69%) say that for family dinners, it’s important that it be a home cooked meal.”

A more recent survey of US parents in 2016 found that mums especially love a meal together (87% v 76% for dads).¹⁶ They also found:

- 76% learn a lot from their kids when they share a meal together.
- 67% think that eating together as a family will make their kids smarter.
- 59% say that family meals are the only time when they can really talk to each other.

Not surprisingly, the top reason that prevents families from having dinner together is that their schedules don’t line up. And more than half (57%) of parents agree that even when they eat together as a family, some of their family members are distracted by technology.

AUSTRALIA

The *Family Meals with Young Kids* study by Deakin University was an online survey completed by almost 1,000 Australian parents in 2014.¹⁷ The aims of the study were to describe family meal characteristics among Australian families with children aged six months to six years. 77% of families said they had dinner together five or more nights per week. And *Taste.com.au* recently surveyed more than 11,000 people and found that 80% of respondents were preparing home cooked meals five or more nights a week, perhaps reflective of the audience of that magazine.¹⁸

UK

A non-scientific survey of 2000 parents by *Mother and Baby Magazine* in the UK found that most thought their children’s behaviour at mealtimes was “appalling”.¹⁹ When toddlers ranging in age from 12 months to three-and-a-half

Family time is a top priority for both parents (88%) and children (79%).

Busy schedules are the culprit that makes it harder for them to find that time.

59% said their family today had fewer family dinners than when they were growing up.

92% of family diners describe them as something they look forward to.

15 Are Americans Still Serving Up Family Dinners? The Harris Poll, 13 Nov 2013, <https://theharrispoll.com/new-york-n-y-november-13-2013-with-americas-most-visible-family-meal-thanksgiving-just-around-the-corner-the-tradition-of-the-family-dinner-appears-alive-and-well-though-some-report-th/>

16 Study shows trends in family mealtimes. Refrigerated & Frozen Foods Industry News 26 May 2016, <https://www.refrigeratedfrozenfood.com/articles/90952-study-shows-trends-in-family-mealtimes>

17 V. Litterbach, Eloise-kate & Campbell, Karen & Spence, Alison. (2017). Family meals with young children: An online study of family mealtime characteristics, among Australian families with children aged six months to six years. BMC Public Health. 17. 10.1186/s12889-016-3960-6.

18 Taste.com.au Eat Real Handbook 2018, <https://www.taste.com.au/mag-media/eat-real-handbook.pdf>

19 Toddlers eat ‘horrific’ diet, BBC News 31 March 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3582259.stm>

years were made to sit at the table, mealtimes were commonly described as a “nightmare”. Seven in 10 pushed their dinner off the table and refused to eat, six in 10 threw their food, half tried to climb down from the table and four in 10 screamed. Six out of 10 mothers said they lost their patience during mealtimes. Another problem was “constant snacking”. Most parents acknowledged their children would benefit from stricter family mealtimes.²⁰

On a more positive note, research from the University of Oxford, using data from a national survey of 2000 adults in the UK, revealed that:

“...those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support. Evening meals that result in respondents feeling closer to those with whom they eat involve more people, more laughter and reminiscing, as well as alcohol. A path analysis suggests that the causal direction runs from eating together to bondedness rather than the other way around.”²¹

The researchers said that the findings suggested that eating together increases social bonding, feelings of wellbeing, contentedness and enhanced one’s embedding within the community.

Professor Robin Dunbar, of the University of Oxford’s Experimental Psychology department, said:

“In these increasingly fraught times, when community cohesion is ever more important, making time for and joining in communal meals is perhaps the single most important thing we can do – both for our own health and wellbeing and for that of the wider community.”²²

MEASURE OF NATIONAL ‘HAPPINESS’?

In 2013, then-UK Prime Minister David Cameron announced that eating meals together as a family would be officially recognised as a mark of happiness to measure Britain’s national “well-being”. The *Telegraph* reported:

“Under the ‘relationships’ category, officials will collect data on the proportion of children who eat a meal with their family at least three times a week. A recent study by the Economic and Social Research Council found that about three quarters of British children aged between 10 and 15 currently do so.”²³

The Office for National Statistics, which would collect and collate the data from children as young as 10, explained:

“Eating regular meals with family is also thought to be an important factor accounting for happiness of children with family life and can strengthen children’s family bonds, sense of belonging and cultural identity. The benefits of eating meals together as a family are also associated with better eating habits, nutritional intake and decreased risk of obesity.”

It appears that this measure was never adopted by the UK government.²⁴

Another problem was “constant snacking”.

Toddlers’ favourite foods

- ◆ 1 Chocolate
- ◆ 2 White bread
- ◆ 3 Biscuits
- ◆ 4 Crisps
- ◆ 5 Fish fingers
- ◆ 6 Chips
- ◆ 7 Cake
- ◆ 8 Bananas
- ◆ 9 Apples
- ◆ 10 Chicken nuggets

Source: BBC News 31 March 2004

Eating regular meals with family is also thought to be an important factor accounting for happiness of children with family life and can strengthen children’s family bonds.

²⁰ TV dinners for toddlers ‘recipe for disaster’. *Telegraph* (UK). 31 March 2004, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1458148/TV-dinners-for-toddlers-recipe-for-disaster.html>

²¹ Dunbar, R.I.M. Breaking Bread: the Functions of Social Eating. *Adaptive Human Behaviour and Physiology* (2017) 3: 198.

²² Social eating connects communities. University of Oxford News. 16 March 2017, <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-03-16-social-eating-connects-communities>

²³ Family mealtimes to become official measure of national ‘happiness’. *Telegraph* (UK). 7 March 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/familyadvice/10681772/Family-mealtimes-to-become-official-measure-of-national-happiness.html>

²⁴ Office for National Statistics (UK), Measures of National Wellbeing 2017, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc364/dashboard/index.html>

New Zealand-Based Research

It is interesting – and encouraging – to note that New Zealand researchers have been examining the potential link between regular family dinners and the overall wellbeing of families. As mentioned earlier, the Families Commission used the data obtained in the *Youth '07 Health and Wellbeing of Secondary School Students in New Zealand* to release a significant report in 2011 entitled, *Eating together at mealtimes: the role of family meals in the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand*.²⁵

The report included *all* mealtimes, although it is generally acknowledged that with school and work commitments of family members, dinner time is the most likely meal when the whole family can gather together, outside of weekends.

Findings included:

- One-third of young people shared meals with their families seven or more times a week and an additional 40 per cent shared meals three to six times a week.
- Teenagers who frequently ate with the family were less likely to report suicidal thoughts.

It also said:

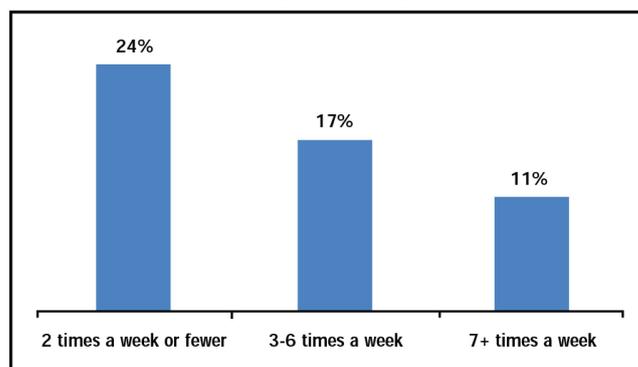
"Approximately 10 percent of students who frequently share meals with their families were smokers, compared with nearly one-quarter of students who report infrequent family meals. Students who shared meals with their families frequently were less likely to report binge drinking, current smoking, current marijuana use and inconsistent contraception use than students who share meals with their families infrequently. The relationships between family meals and risk-taking behaviours were significant after controlling for age, gender, ethnicity and deprivation."

The University of Auckland undertook further research to examine any relationship between family meals and nutritional behaviour of adolescents.²⁶ Published in 2013, the research found that students who shared meals with their families most frequently (seven or more times per week) were most likely to be male, of younger age, and Asian ethnicity. Students who infrequently shared meals with their families (fewer than two times in the previous week or never) were more likely to be female, Maori or Pacific ethnicity, or live in a high deprivation area. The researchers said:

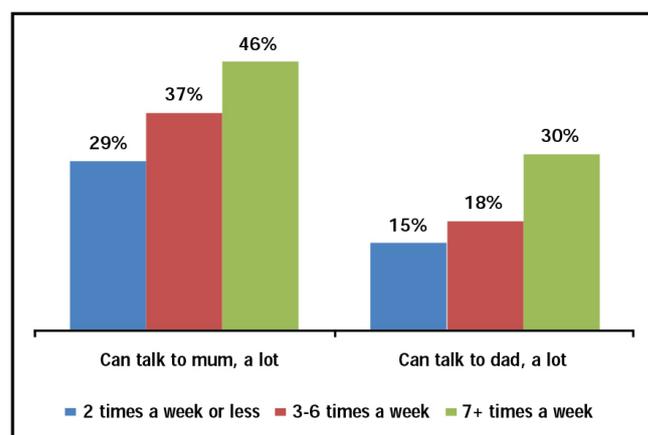
"Overall, students reporting frequent family meals were also more likely to report healthier food environments. There was a significant relationship between frequency of family meals and home availability of fruits and vegetables, junk food, and soft drinks such that students sharing the most frequent family meals were more likely to usually have fruits and vegetables available to eat at home and less likely to have junk food and soft drinks available at home."

The relationships between family meals and risk-taking behaviours were significant after controlling for age, gender, ethnicity and deprivation.

Current cigarette use by frequency of family meals



Extent to which students feel they can talk to their parents by frequency of family meals



Source: *Eating together at mealtimes: the role of family meals in the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand (2011)*. Families Commission

25 Utter, J., Denny, S., Grant, S., Robinson, E., Ameratunga, S., Fleming, T.; *Eating together at mealtimes: the role of family meals in the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand (2011)*. Families Commission Research Fund, Report No 6/11

26 Utter, J., et al., *Family Meals among New Zealand Young People: Relationships with Eating Behaviours and Body Mass Index*. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, Volume 45, Issue 1, 3 – 11

Significantly though, there were no relationships between frequency of family meals and BMI.

In follow-up research, data collected as part of *Youth'12* (previously referenced on page 11) – a survey of 8500 secondary school students – was analysed to see whether there was any link between family meals and adolescent emotional well-being.²⁷ They found that frequent family meals may have a protective effect on the mental health of adolescents, particularly for depressive symptoms in girls. They said:

"This is a potentially important finding because rates of depression are markedly higher for girls than for boys and particularly high for adolescent girls living in New Zealand. Previous analyses of the current dataset estimated that approximately 16% of adolescent girls in New Zealand experience significant depressive symptoms, compared with 8% of boys."

The researchers noted that adolescents experiencing a low mood may simply avoid spending time or eating with their families.

As mentioned on page 11, an earlier study (2008) by University of Auckland researchers surveyed predominantly Pacific adolescents in seven decile one or two high schools (lower socio-economic areas).²⁸ They were asked: "In the last 5 school days, how many times did all or most of your family living in your house eat an evening meal together?" The researchers reported:

"Frequency of family meals was associated with many positive aspects of home food environment and positive nutrition behaviours, including parental support for healthy eating, limits on television use, having fruit available at home, consuming five fruits and vegetables a day, eating breakfast, and bringing lunch from home. Surprisingly, no relationships were observed between frequency of family meals and accessibility and consumption of many high fat/high sugar foods... Our findings suggest that the positive effect of family meals may reflect an overall positive home food environment. Families who have meals together have more healthful foods available at home and support their child in eating healthfully" (emphasis added).

The heading of a 2016 study by Queensland University, of mainly NZ and Australian families, will be welcomed by many parents: *Mealtime Structure and Responsive Feeding Practices Are Associated With Less Food Fussiness and More Food Enjoyment in Children.*²⁹

In the study, the term 'non-responsive feeding practices' included rewards for eating (e.g. dessert) and persuasive eating (trying to get them to eat even if they say they're not hungry). The researchers said:

"Parents who used non-responsive feeding practices and provided less structure reported that their child was a fussier eater. Conversely, parents who used less non-responsive feeding practices and provided more structure in terms of timing, setting, and family engagement reported that their child enjoyed food more and looked forward to mealtimes" (emphasis added).

At the time of finalising this report, new University of Auckland research from the *Growing Up in New Zealand* longitudinal study of 6025 45-month-old

Students who infrequently shared meals with their families were more likely to be female, Maori or Pacific ethnicity, or live in a high deprivation area.

Frequent family meals may have a protective effect on the mental health of adolescents, particularly for depressive symptoms in girls.

Adolescents experiencing a low mood may simply avoid spending time or eating with their families.

27 Utter, J. et al; Family Meals and Adolescent Emotional Well-Being: Findings From a National Study. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2017;49:67-72

28 Utter, J., et al; Relationships between frequency of family meals, BMI and nutritional aspects of the home food environment among New Zealand adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity* 2008, 5:50

29 Finnane, Julia M, et al; Mealtime Structure and Responsive Feeding Practices Are Associated With Less Food Fussiness and More Food Enjoyment in Children. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2017;49:11-18

children was published.³⁰ It compared nutrition-related behaviours in homes and ECE (early childhood education) centres for 1181 children.

At home, most mothers reported their child ate breakfast every day (95%), ate a variety of foods (81%), ate the same food as them (80%), and their family sat together for the main meal every day (79%). Just over half of mothers (58%) said meals were enjoyable and a time to talk to each other (56%). However, only 46% ate meals with the television turned off.

With regard to ECE services, it found that the most common recommended nutrition-related behaviours were: never using food as a punishment or reward (93%); encouraging water consumption (84%); and sitting with children to eat (80%).

Lead research Dr Sarah Gerritsen commented that early childhood is widely regarded as the ideal time to develop behaviours that support lifelong healthy eating behaviours:

"The home is a key social environment where children develop eating patterns and food preferences. Practices such as eating together as a family, having breakfast at home, exposure to a wide variety of foods and not watching screens while eating have been shown to encourage a healthy diet in early childhood. Some of these behaviours have also been shown to protect against the development of childhood overweight and obesity."

ANALYSING THE BENEFITS

From our focus just on New Zealand-based research, we now add the large amount of research which has been carried out around the world, and group them together according to their findings. Once again, the majority of these studies specifically deal with family dinners, although there are some which look at general family meals together. However, as we previously mentioned, communal eating is *most likely* to happen at dinner time unless it's during the weekend (for example, traditional Sunday lunch, or Saturday brunch), or during the school holidays when families are more likely to be at home or on holiday together.

Well-Being

One of the greatest areas of focus by researchers has been a potential link between the mental wellbeing of children / teenagers and the frequency of family dinners.

As mentioned on the previous page, the Auckland University study of 8500 secondary school students found that frequent family meals may have a protective effect on the mental health of adolescents, particularly for depressive symptoms in girls.³¹

A 2012 Canadian study of 26,000 younger teenagers found that the frequency of family dinners *negatively* related to internalising and externalising symptoms (i.e. decreased their likelihood) and *positively* related to emotional well-being, prosocial behaviour, and life satisfaction, and that this was consistent across gender, age and socio-economic status.³²

Only 46% ate meals with the television turned off.



Family dinners facilitate open communication in families and present opportunities for youths to discuss social and emotional issues and coping strategies.

30 Gerritsen, S., Anderson, S., Morton, S., & Wall, C. (2018). Pre-school nutrition-related behaviours at home and early childhood education services: Findings from the Growing Up in New Zealand longitudinal study. *Public Health Nutrition*, 21 (7) 1222-1231. doi:10.1017/S1368980017004116

31 Utter, J. et al; Family Meals and Adolescent Emotional Well-Being: Findings From a National Study. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2017;49:67-72

32 Elgar, F.; et al; Family Dinners, Communication, and Mental Health in Canadian Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health* · September 2012 DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.07.012

The researchers said that "family dinners may benefit adolescent mental health across the full range of zero to seven dinners per week..." and "that family dinners facilitate open communication in families and present opportunities for youths to discuss social and emotional issues and coping strategies."

In 2000, Syracuse University in New York wanted to examine how one aspect of family life, notably family rituals and routines, may protect children with asthma (one of the most common chronic diseases of childhood) from anxiety-related symptoms.³³ While the study looked specifically at the asthma aspect, they made this interesting observation:

"When life stress, family health, and child health were considered simultaneously, we found a more complete picture of the potential for family rituals to protect children from anxiety. For mothers, the meaning associated with family rituals was related to lower levels of anxiety in the context of multiple family life stress and health risks. Under conditions of multiple stressors, family rituals may offer one avenue for families to stabilise their lives and provide a sense of belonging. Families who are able to create meaningful family rituals in the first place may be better equipped to respond to multiple stressors" (emphasis added).

Researchers at the University of Minnesota surveyed almost 5000 teens and found family mealtimes in general to be a "potentially protective factor" against substance use, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, and towards improved academic performance, and self-esteem.³⁴ They commented:

"Family meals may also provide a formal or informal 'check-in' time during which parents can tune in to the emotional wellbeing of their teens, particularly girls. Likewise, family mealtimes may serve as a marker for young people spending more time at home and away from negative peer influences or youth culture more generally."

They also noted:

"Girls may be particularly sensitive to the nuances of family interactions, and the frequency of family meals may therefore be more important to their behavioural and emotional health."

This view was backed up in a 10-year longitudinal study of 2379 girls aged 9-19 in 2008 by researchers at Northeastern University (Boston), who found that more frequent family meals in the first three years studied predicted greater family cohesion and problem- and emotion-focused coping in study years 7 and 8 (ages 16-17). Family cohesion mediated family meals and risk of smoking in study year 10 (age 19).³⁵

Family rituals may offer one avenue for families to stabilise their lives and provide a sense of belonging.

Girls may be particularly sensitive to the nuances of family interactions.

Family dinners may promote adolescent health and buffer the impact of stressful situations on adolescent functioning.

33 Markson, Samia., Barbara H. Fiese; Family Rituals as a Protective Factor for Children With Asthma Family Rituals as a Protective Factor for Children With Asthma, Journal of Pediatric Psychology, Volume 25, Issue 7, 1 October 2000, Pages 471-480,

34 Eisenberg, M E., Rachel E. O, Neumark-Sztainer D., Story M., Linda H B. Correlations Between Family Meals and Psychosocial Well-being Among Adolescents. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2004;158(8):792-796. doi:10.1001/archpedi.158.8.792

35 Franko DL., Thompson D., Affenito SG., Barton BA., Striegel-Moore. What mediates the relationship between family meals and adolescent health issues? Health Psychology, 27(2): S109-S117, 2008,

Cyberbullying Victimization

A 2014 Canadian study from McGill University sought to examine any association between the relatively recent development of cyberbullying victimisation and adolescent mental health, and the potential moderating role of family contact – specifically family dinners. They were concerned that cyberbullying – like traditional bullying – increased the risk for internalising and externalising problems, the misuse of drugs and alcohol, and suicidal ideation. They surveyed 18,834 students from 49 schools in a Midwestern US state. Their results suggested that family dinners involving communication and contact were beneficial to the mental health of adolescents, and “*may help protect adolescents from the harmful consequences of cyberbullying.*”³⁶ They said:

“Family dinners shared a negative association with mental health and substance use problems, and these associations strengthened as cyberbullying became more frequent... With more frequent dinners comes more regular family contact, which facilitates parental guidance and support, open communication with parents and siblings, and opportunities for adolescents to express problems and concerns as they arise. Therefore, family dinners are indicative of a broad set of family characteristics that may promote adolescent health and buffer the impact of stressful situations on adolescent functioning.”

Risk-Taking

The New Zealand Families Commission report in 2011 entitled *Eating together at mealtimes: the role of family meals in the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand*³⁷ – mentioned earlier in this report – found that teenagers who frequently ate with their family were less likely to report suicidal thoughts, binge drinking, current smoking, current marijuana use and inconsistent contraception use.

In an article published by the researchers in the *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*³⁸, they commented:

“It is important to note that the associations between family meals and many of the well-being indicators were not observed for young people sharing meals with their families 3–4 times a week. Rather, it appears that the benefits of family meals were only significant at a frequency of 5–6 times a week or more often... Thus, our findings suggest that family meals may have the added benefit of promoting positive emotions, not just preventing negative ones... Family meals provide important opportunities for these relationships to develop, for the sharing of information around activities and experiences and for parents to provide clear expectations about behaviour and family values.”

In a 2009 University of Alabama study of 4,000–5,000 teenagers over three years, the researchers found that frequent family dinners were associated with lower probabilities of all substance-use (lower frequencies of smoking for males, and lower frequencies of marijuana use for both genders); running away from home; and binge-drinking, physical fights, property-destruction, and stealing.³⁹

It appears that the benefits of family meals were only significant at a frequency of 5–6 times a week or more often.



Family meals may also increase parental supervision time and hence reduce the time that could potentially either be spent in solitary experimentation with addictive substances.

36 Elgar, Frank J. et al; Cyberbullying Victimization and Mental Health in Adolescents and the Moderating Role of Family Dinners. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2014;168(11):1015-1022. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2014.1223

37 Utter, J., Denny, S., Grant, S., Robinson, E., Ameratunga, S., Fleming, T.; Eating together at mealtimes: the role of family meals in the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand (2011). Families Commission Research Fund, Report No 6/11

38 Utter, J., Denny, S., Robinson, E., Fleming, T., Ameratunga, S. and Grant, S. Family meals and the well-being of adolescents (2013), *J Paediatr Child Health*, 49: 906–911. doi:10.1111/jpc.12428

39 Sen, B., The relationship between frequency of family dinner and adolescent problem behaviours after adjusting for other family characteristics. *Journal of adolescence*, 33: 187-196, 2010.

They said:

"These findings indicate that participating in family meals may have additional benefits to adolescents even if there is good family connectedness and parental awareness, and when the families do other activities together. It may be that eating meals together provides a certain kind of emotional sustenance that other family activities or other forms of parent-child bonding cannot perfectly substitute for. Family meals may also increase parental supervision time and hence reduce the time that could potentially either be spent in solitary experimentation with addictive substances, or with peers who are a 'bad influence' on the adolescent.... It reinforces the importance of parent-child connectedness and parental awareness of a child's friends, school and teachers."

However, it does caution *"against assuming that more frequent family meals are a panacea that will help reduce all adolescent substance-use and delinquent behaviour problems for both genders, and also suggests that, at the margin (that is, a once-a-week increase in the frequency of family dining), the size of the protective effect is quite small."*

In 1998–1999, 806 Minnesota adolescents were surveyed in public schools and again by mail in 2003–2004 as part of a longitudinal population-based study. Interestingly, there was a gender-divide.⁴⁰ According to the report in *ScienceDaily*:

"Girls who had reported five or more family meals per week had significantly less substance use than did the females who did not have regular family meals. The girls who had regular meals had about half the odds of substance use. However, boys showed no significant difference in substance use between those who had regular family meals and those who did not. 'Unfortunately we don't really know why we see this benefit for girls and not boys,' (lead researcher) Eisenberg said. 'There is some evidence that girls and boys communicate and interact differently with their families, so it's possible that the conversations about behavioural expectations or the subtle 'checking in' that can happen during shared meals might be understood differently by girls and boys'"⁴² (emphasis added).

In a large study by the University of Minnesota, almost 100,000 6th to 12th grade (11-18 y/o) students were surveyed in 1997 and the analysis was published in 2006.⁴² The researchers concluded:

"The findings of the present study suggest that the frequency of family dinner is an external developmental asset or protective factor that may curtail high-risk behaviours among youth.... Family rituals such as regular mealtimes may ease the stress of daily living in the fast-paced families of today's society."

In an important discussion about 'external' and 'internal' assets developed by young people, the researchers said:

"The significant inverse relationships between family dinner frequency and high-risk behaviours as diverse as substance use, violence, and eating problems, even after controlling for the effects of family support and communication, indicate that there is something unique about families who frequently share meals together. Our findings indicate that family meal frequency is more than just a proxy for general functioning.... The strong,

The girls who had regular family meals had about half the odds of substance use.

Conversations about behavioural expectations or the subtle 'checking in' that can happen during shared meals might be understood differently by girls and boys.

There is something unique about families who frequently share meals together.

40 Eisenberg, ME., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Fulkerson, JA., and Story, M., Family meals and substance abuse: Is there a long-term protective association? *Journal of adolescent health*, 43:151-145, 2008

41 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/07/080723192444.htm>

42 Fulkerson, Jayne A et al; Family Dinner Meal Frequency and Adolescent Development: Relationships with Developmental Assets and High-Risk Behaviours. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39 (2006) 337–345

positive associations between family meal frequency and external assets such as family support, positive family communication, parental involvement in school, and family boundaries suggest that the dynamics of the family mealtime environment may be reflective of high-quality parent-child interactions. In addition, positive relationships between family meal frequency and internal assets such as social resistance skills, self-esteem, having a sense of purpose, and a positive view of the future suggest that adolescents may learn social skills and develop a more positive self-worth during mealtime interactions. Enhancement of external and internal developmental assets during mealtime interactions will benefit adolescent development” (emphasis added).

Parental engagement fostered around the dinner table is one of the most potent tools to help parents raise healthy drug-free children.

For 18 years up to 2012, *The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA Columbia)* surveyed thousands of American teens and their parents to identify factors associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood of teen substance use. Their surveys consistently found a relationship between children having frequent dinners with their parents and a decreased risk of their smoking, drinking or using other drugs. They argued that parental engagement fostered around the dinner table is one of the most potent tools to help parents raise healthy drug-free children.⁴³

What conclusions about teen risk-taking can we gain from all these studies we have just discussed? Perhaps the American Psychological Association (APA) sums it up best when they were promoting a research paper on this topic at their conference 20 years ago.⁴⁴ The research paper backed up the other studies we have referred to – teens who were less likely to do drugs, less likely to be depressed, more motivated at school and had better peer relationships ate with their families an average of five days a week compared to the teens who only ate with their families three days a week. The APA said:

Family mealtimes play an important role in helping teens deal with the pressures of adolescence.

“Clearly family mealtimes are strongly related to adjustment, but exactly what aspect of the event – the sharing, the stories teens tell about their day or hear from others in the family – helps prevent adjustment problems for them hasn’t been pinpointed. But, say the authors, family mealtimes, it would appear, play an important role in helping teens deal with the pressures of adolescence.”

Teen Sexual Activity

Boston College researchers examined this specific issue in 2008 by surveying almost 5000 teens, 1000 of whom were siblings.⁴⁵ The teens were 12 to 16 years old when the study began and they then completed the survey every year for three years. The research found that the more times a week an adolescent reported having dinner with their family, “doing something religious”, or having fun as a family, the less likely they would engage in sexual activity or risky sexual behaviour. They said that family activities were “centrally important supports for children, providing opportunities for emotional warmth, communication, and transmission of values and beliefs”⁴⁶ – a similar conclusion drawn by the Families Commission in New Zealand who commented in their 2011 report about expectations about behaviours and family values during family meals (page 19).

Family activities provide opportunities for emotional warmth, communication, and transmission of values and beliefs.

43 The Importance of Family Dinners VII. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2011>

44 American Psychological Association. “Frequency Of Family Meals May Prevent Teen Adjustment Problems; Teens Less Likely To Do Drugs, More Motivated In School.” ScienceDaily, 21 August 1997.

45 Coley et al. Using Sibling Differences to Estimate Effects of Parenting on Adolescent Sexual Risk Behaviours. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2008; 43 (2): 133 DOI:

46 More family meals mean less risky teen sex. Reuters Health. 31 Jan 2009, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/547480/More-family-meals-mean-less-risky-teen-sex>

Nutrition

The University of Auckland's *Youth '07* survey (referred to on page 11) found that students sharing the most frequent family meals were more likely to have fruits and vegetables available to eat at home and less likely to have junk food and soft drinks available.⁴⁷

And the 2008 study of predominantly Pacific adolescents in seven NZ high schools in decile one or two schools (lower socio-economic areas) found that the frequency of family meals was associated with many positive aspects of home food environment and positive nutrition behaviours, including parental support for healthy eating, limits on television use, having fruit available at home, consuming five fruits and vegetables a day, eating breakfast, and bringing lunch from home.⁴⁸

In a significant analysis in 2012, researchers at Rutgers (the State University of New Jersey) evaluated results from 68 previous studies considering the association between family mealtimes and children's health.⁴⁹ The accompanying media release summarised their findings:

"Their review of the literature revealed numerous benefits to children associated with having frequent family meals, including increased intake of fruits, vegetables, fiber, calcium-rich foods, and vitamins. In addition, the more a family ate together the less children consumed dietary components thought to be harmful to health. Although the researchers found only a weak link between family meals and obesity risk, children in families with frequent family meals tended to have lower body mass index (BMI, kg/m²) than those who enjoyed fewer family meals."⁵⁰

A five-year longitudinal study of 1700 Minnesota students, at age 16 and then age 20, found that family meal frequency predicted higher intakes of fruit and vegetables, and lower intakes of soft drinks during adulthood. It also predicted higher priority for meal structure and social eating, and predicted more frequent dinner meals and breakfast meals.⁵¹ Different researchers from the same university extended the findings to a further study of younger adolescents (aged 13 and 17 when surveyed) and the findings were similar: regular family meals were positively associated with daily intakes of vegetables, calcium-rich food, fiber, calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, zinc, folate, and vitamins A and B6 among both genders. For males, it also meant lower fast-food intake.⁵²

Rutgers researchers also analysed responses from 18,177 adolescents from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in 2003, and concluded:

"The presence of at least one parent during the evening meal was associated with a lowered odds of poor consumption of fruits, vegetables, and dairy foods and a lowered odds of skipping breakfast among adolescents. The magnitude of the effect is quite large: Of adolescents who ate three or fewer family meals

Parents can better control the food that is served during meals and monitor their children's food choices, recognising early signs of eating disorders or bad habits and intervene.



47 Utter, J., et al., Family Meals among New Zealand Young People: Relationships with Eating Behaviours and Body Mass Index. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, Volume 45, Issue 1, 3 – 11

48 Utter, J., et al; Relationships between frequency of family meals, BMI and nutritional aspects of the home food environment among New Zealand adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity* 2008, 5:50

49 Martin-Biggers J, Spaccarotella K, Berhaupt-Glickstein A, Hongu N, Worobey J, Byrd-Bredbenner C. Come and Get It! A Discussion of Family Mealtime Literature and Factors Affecting Obesity Risk. *Advances in Nutrition*. 2014;5(3):235-247. doi:10.3945/an.113.005116

50 Come and Get It! Researchers Find Additional Evidence That Families That Eat Together May Be the Healthiest. Media Release - Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB). 17 April 2012, <https://www.newswise.com/articles/come-and-get-it-researchers-find-additional-evidence-that-families-that-eat-together-may-be-the-healthiest>

51 Larson, Nicole I. et al., Family Meals during Adolescence Are Associated with Higher Diet Quality and Healthful Meal Patterns during Young Adulthood. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, Volume 107, Issue 9, 1502 - 1510

52 Burgess-Champoux, Teri.L et al; Are Family Meal Patterns Associated with Overall Diet Quality during the Transition from Early to Middle Adolescence? *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2009;41:79-86.

per week, three-fourths reported poor consumption of vegetables, compared with two-thirds of adolescents who ate six or seven family meals per week”⁵³ (emphasis added).

They added, “Busy schedules of parents and teenagers interfere with more frequent family meals. Therefore, when developing interventions to improve adolescent nutrition, particular attention should be paid to the challenges families with older children face in participating in regular mealtimes (i.e., schedules).”

Harvard Medical Researchers studied 16,000 9-14 year olds and concluded, “Eating family dinner was associated with healthful dietary intake patterns, including more fruits and vegetables, less fried food and soda, less saturated and trans fat, lower glycemic load, more fiber and micronutrients from food, and no material differences in red meat or snack foods.”⁵⁴

An analysis of the effect of eating at home with the family on children’s food consumption in Switzerland (2018) had similar findings:

“It is likely, for instance, that during family meals parents can naturally teach nutrition education by being a good role model and by talking with children about the food that is been eaten. Moreover, at home, parents can better control the food that is served during meals and monitor their children’s food choices, recognising early signs of eating disorders or bad habits and intervene.”⁵⁵

At the time of writing this report, an interesting US-based study had just been published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*.⁵⁶ Using the same sample population as the Minnesota University studies (covered later in the section “Preventing Eating Disorders”), it analysed the link between early cooking skills and nutrition later in life. The study said:

“Reporting adequate cooking skills at age 18–23 years was associated with usual involvement in meal preparation, having frequent family meals, greater vegetable consumption, and lower consumption of fast food later in life.”

Author Associate Professor Jennifer Utter, now based at the University of Auckland’s Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences (and whose New Zealand-based research is quoted extensively in this report), told the *NZ Herald*, “The impact of developing cooking skills early in life may not be apparent until later in adulthood when individuals have more opportunity and responsibility for meal preparation.”⁵⁷

The *NZ Herald* report also referred to Massey University research in 2017 which found that only 13% of teachers of year 7 & 8 school children (age 11-13) identified planning and preparing a *complete* meal as part of the curriculum. According to the Massey University media release:

“Of those surveyed, only 10 per cent of teachers listed the fruit and vegetable content of a recipe as a factor that influenced their recipe choice. Many of the foods and techniques taught in class were based around cakes, muffins and desserts, with less than 50 per cent of the foods prepared as main meals. Associate Professor Carol Wham, domain leader for public health nutrition,

Reporting adequate cooking skills at age 18–23 years was associated with usual involvement in meal preparation, having frequent family meals, greater vegetable consumption.

Many of the foods and techniques taught in class were based around cakes, muffins and desserts.

53 Videon, TM, Manning, CK., Influences on adolescent eating patterns: The importance of family meals. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 32: 365-373, 2003.

54 Gillman MW et al; Family dinner and diet quality among older children and adolescents. *Arch Fam Med*. 2000 Mar;9(3):235-40.

55 Suggs, L. S; et al; Is it better at home with my family? The effects of people and place on children’s eating behaviour. *Appetite* Volume 121, 1 February 2018, Pages 111-118

56 Utter, Jennifer et al. Self-Perceived Cooking Skills in Emerging Adulthood Predict Better Dietary Behaviours and Intake 10 Years Later: A Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour* , Volume 50 , Issue 5 , 494 - 500

57 Why learning to cook young is good for future health. *NZ Herald*. 25 April 2018, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12039245

says while some schools are doing very well, there were major discrepancies in the survey results. 'Developing the ability to prepare a simple healthy meal will empower children and their families to access and enjoy nutritious meals within their own budgetary, cultural, social and time constraints.'"⁵⁸

Obesity

Do shared family mealtimes help prevent obesity in children?

This is the question asked by a number of research papers, including researchers at the University of Illinois in 2011 who examined 17 studies involving more than 182,000 children aged between 3 and 17.⁵⁹ They found that "Children and adolescents who share family meals 3 or more times per week are more likely to be in a normal weight range and have healthier dietary and eating patterns than those who share fewer than 3 family meals together. In addition, they are less likely to engage in disordered eating."

Benefits included a reduction in the odds for being overweight (12%), eating unhealthy foods (20%), disordered eating (35%), and an increase in the odds for eating healthy foods (24%).

The Rutgers' analysis of 68 studies, mentioned in the previous section (page 22), found that although there was only a "weak link" between family meals and obesity risk, children in families with frequent family meals tended to have lower body mass index. On the other hand, the University of Auckland Youth '07 survey found no relationship between frequency of family meals and BMI.

However, University of Queensland researchers found that teens who ate regularly with their families were less likely to be overweight. The findings, published in 2005, were drawn from the long-running health study – the Mater-University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy⁶⁰ – which followed the progress of 3795 Brisbane mothers and their families from 1981 onwards.

The study found that having a healthy maternal attitude to family eating and diet was more important than the frequency of shared meals. It said:

*"The odds of being overweight at age 14 were greater among those whose mothers stated that it was not important that the family ate together."*⁶¹

The lead researcher, in the accompanying media release, said, "Eating together will enable the parent to have better knowledge of the child's food choices and amount that they tend to eat."⁶²

Harvard Medical School also examined this issue in 2005 by studying a cohort of 7784 girls and 6647 boys, 9 to 14 years of age.⁶³ They argue that the influence parents have on their children's eating patterns happens at a younger age (as early as infancy) but that "food choices and eating patterns of adolescents may be more a function of individual, environmental, and societal influences, including influences from peers, schools, mass media, marketing, and cultural norms." They also questioned whether adolescents who were more overweight could have been skipping family dinner as a way to diet.



Children and adolescents who share family meals 3 or more times per week are more likely to be in a normal weight range and have healthier dietary and eating patterns.

Food choices and eating patterns of adolescents may be more a function of individual, environmental, and societal influences.

Adolescents who were more overweight could have been skipping family dinner as a way to diet.

58 Veges don't make the cut in school kitchens, Massey University. 23 May 2017, http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/about-massey/news/article.cfm?mnarticle_uid=02228075-ADD6-535A-1609-22519203DDFE

59 Hammons AJ, Fiese BH. Is Frequency of Shared Family Meals Related to the Nutritional Health of Children and Adolescents? *Pediatrics*. 2011;127(6):e1565-e1574. doi:10.1542/peds.2010-1440.

60 <https://social-science.uq.edu.au/mater-university-queensland-study-pregnancy>

61 Mamun, A. A., Lawlor, D. A., O'Callaghan, M. J., Williams, G. M. and Najman, J. M. (2005), Positive Maternal Attitude to the Family Eating Together Decreases the Risk of Adolescent Overweight. *Obesity Research*, 13: 1422–1430. doi:10.1038/oby.2005.172

62 Family meals cut teenage fatness. The University of Queensland. Media Release 31 Oct 2005

63 Taveras, Elie M., et al; Family Dinner and Adolescent Overweight, *Obesity Research*, Vol. 13 No. 5 May 2005

Finally, a study published in 2015 by researchers at the University of Minnesota and Columbia University surveyed adolescents and then followed them up as young adults 10 years later.⁶⁴ They found that having family meals as an adolescent is protective for a young adult from being overweight and from obesity 10 years later at all levels of family meal frequency (ie, 1-2, 3-4, 5 or more) compared with never having family meals, and that family meals in adolescence is protective for overweight / obesity longitudinally into young adulthood.

Preventing Eating Disorders

A number of research papers have examined the link between regular family dinners and whether it is associated with decreased odds of engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviours.

In a 2004 study, researchers at the University of Minnesota surveyed 4,746 teens over five years and examined any link between family meals and disordered eating (which included unhealthy weight control behaviours, binge eating, and chronic dieting).⁶⁵ Their conclusion:

"In general, adolescents who reported more frequent family meals, high priority for family meals, a positive atmosphere at family meals, and a more structured family meal environment were less likely to engage in disordered eating. For example, 18.1% of girls who reported 1-2 family meals/week engaged in extreme weight control behaviours compared with 8.8% of girls who reported 3-4 family meals/week. Making family meals a priority, in spite of scheduling difficulties, emerged as the most consistent protective factor for disordered eating. Associations between family meal patterns and disordered eating behaviours tended to be stronger among girls than among boys."

In 2008, the Minnesota University research team did a follow-up study utilising some of the same study population as their 2004 study.⁶⁶ Published in the international journal *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, the study found that girls who ate five or more family meals a week had a much healthier relationship with food in later life:

"Among girls, regular family meals predicted lower prevalences of extreme weight control behaviours, including self-induced vomiting and use of diet pills, laxatives, and diuretics, at the 5-year follow-up."

In the subsequent international media coverage, the *Sydney Morning Herald* interviewed a director of a local eating disorders clinic *The Oak House*, who said:

*"When adolescents are feeling that they're not coping they turn to something that they can control and food is something available and accessible for them to control. Clearly, if they're sitting with their family on a regular basis then their family can be more in control of their eating. It's about families and young people feeling connected within their family and that builds self-esteem and sense of worth and that works very actively against someone developing an eating disorder."*⁶⁷

Interestingly, the study found participating regularly in family meals made no

Making family meals a priority, in spite of scheduling difficulties, emerged as the most consistent protective factor for disordered eating.



Girls who ate five or more family meals a week had a much healthier relationship with food in later life.

64 Berge et al; The Protective Role of Family Meals for Youth Obesity: 10-Year Longitudinal Associations. *The Journal of Pediatrics* 2015;166:296-301.

65 Neumark-Sztainer, D, Wall, M, Story, M, Fulkerson, JA. Are family meal patterns associated with disordered eating behaviours among adolescents? *Journal of adolescent health*. 35:350-359, 2004.

66 Neumark-Sztainer, D. PhD, MPH, RD; Eisenberg, M E. ScD, MPH; Fulkerson, J A. PhD; et al. Family Meals and Disordered Eating in Adolescents - Longitudinal Findings From Project EAT. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2008;162(1):17-22. doi:10.1001/archpediatrics.2007.9

67 Teen girls need family meals. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 9 January 2008, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/health/eating-with-family-keeps-girls-healthy/2008/01/08/1199554655652.html>

difference to the future eating habits of boys. One possible explanation is that boys are less pressured about their body appearance than girls.

A study from Harvard Medical School published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* (2010) surveyed over 13,000 teens and pre-teens over a three-year period utilising *The Growing Up Today Study* (GUTS), a longitudinal cohort study of adolescent girls and boys living in the United States.

"We found that female youth who ate dinner with members of their family most days or every day of the week were less likely to initiate purging behaviours, binge eating, and frequent dieting in the following year. These associations were independent of age"⁶⁸ (emphasis added).

The link was similar between males and females, although because of the lower frequency of the behaviours in males, the link was not statistically significant. The researchers commented:

"One way that eating family dinner may protect against disordered eating behaviours is that eating family dinner together may encourage more regular meal consumption, which may prevent disordered eating behaviours, in particular binge eating. Another possible explanation is that eating meals together may help enhance the quality of parent-child relationships, in particular parent-child communication and cohesion, which may reduce risk for engaging in these disordered behaviours."

University of Minnesota researchers (different from the 2004 and 2008 papers mentioned above) also examined this potential link. However, they looked at whether the *communication* during the meal limited the benefits – for example, where family members talked negatively about food and eating, or where the atmosphere at the family meal wasn't positive.⁶⁹

While concluding that teenagers – and particularly girls – who have more frequent family meals were less likely to engage in disordered eating behaviours, they sounded a clear warning that it's not just the food served that needs to be moderated:

"Among girls, the association between family meals and disordered eating behaviours was found to be moderated by family level weight and body talk, weight-based teasing, and overall family functioning...It might be that for girls who have experienced poor family functioning or have been exposed to family weight teasing or high levels of weight talk, sharing a meal with the family does not offer the same safety or protection against the use of disordered eating, as compared with girls living in a family environment that is characterised by positive family functioning and free of weight-based conversations" (emphasis added).

Brain Power

The UK government published research in 2008 which would have interested every parent. The research, which tracked 19,000 schoolchildren, suggested that children *"are more likely to get five good GCSEs when parents insist on sharing family meals every night – and set regular evening curfews, figures show. Irrespective of*

Eating family dinner together may encourage more regular meal consumption, which may prevent disordered eating behaviours, in particular binge eating.

It's not just the food served that needs to be moderated.

For girls who have been exposed to family weight teasing or high levels of weight talk, sharing a meal with the family does not offer the same safety or protection against the use of disordered eating.

68 Haines, Jess. et al; Family dinner and disordered eating behaviours in a large cohort of adolescents. *Eat Disord.* 2010 January ; 18(1): 10–24. doi:10.1080/10640260903439516

69 Loth K, Wall M, Choi C-W, et al. Family meals and disordered eating in adolescents: Are the Benefits the Same for Everyone? *The International journal of eating disorders.* 2015;48(1):100-110. doi:10.1002/eat.22339.

social class, family 'togetherness' was seen as one of the biggest bearings on success in the classroom.⁷⁰ (GCSE is similar to NCEA in New Zealand.)⁷¹

Irrespective of social class, family 'togetherness' was seen as one of the biggest bearings on success in the classroom.

Published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the report said:

"There is a strong relationship between regularity of having a family evening meal and GCSE attainment. Half of those who nearly always have a family evening meal attained 8 or more good GCSEs, compared to less than a third of those who seldom do."⁷²

According to the report, 50% of those eating with mothers, fathers and siblings six or seven times a week gained eight or more A* to C grades, compared to 31 per cent of teenagers who never ate with families.

Variation in GCSE attainment and frequency of eating family meals together

Year 9 (2004)	GCSE qualifications attained in Year 11 (2006)					
	8+ A*-C	5-7 A*-C	1-4 A*-C	1-4 D-G	5+D-G	None reported
None	31	15	26	8	14	7
1 or 2	40	14	21	7	14	5
3-5	47	16	20	4	11	3
6 or 7	50	14	19	4	9	4

Source: LSYPE, waves 1 and 4

Source: Department for Children, Schools and Families (UK).

Youth Cohort Study & Longitudinal Study Of Young People in England: The Activities and Experiences of 16 year olds: England 2007

Dissenting Views

Despite the many studies that have pointed to *benefits* of regular family dinners, and mealtimes in general, there have been some studies that have suggested no benefit, or that other factors are at play.

Researchers from the Boston University of Social Work used a sample of 9700 children who were surveyed five times from 1998 (aged 5) through to 2007 (aged 13-14), looking at both breakfast and dinner frequency.⁷³ They said:

"Using extremely rich data on a nationally representative sample of children who entered kindergarten in fall 1998 and were followed through eighth grade and applying more rigorous methods than have typically been used in previous studies on this topic, we found little evidence for beneficial effects of frequent family meals" (emphasis added).

However, they added an important caveat to their results, saying:

"We examined children through eighth grade only (when children were on average 13.6 years old). Many of the prior studies finding strong positive associations between frequent family meals and child outcomes focused on older adolescents, for whom family meals may be more protective. Relatedly, because our sample is relatively young, we were not able to examine all the outcomes that have been studied in prior research. Most notable is the lack of information on substance use, which other studies have found to be related to family meal frequency" (emphasis added).



70 Regular family meals boost GCSE exam results. Telegraph (UK) 26 June 2008.

71 <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/studying-in-new-zealand/secondary-school-and-ncea/international-recognition-of-ncea/specific-country-requirements/>

72 Department for Children, Schools and Families (UK). Youth Cohort Study & Longitudinal Study of Young People in England: The Activities and Experiences of 16 year olds: England 2007, June 2008

73 Miller DP, Waldfogel J, Han W-J. Family Meals and Child Academic and Behavioural Outcomes. Family Meals and Child Academic and Behavioural Outcomes. Child development. 2012;83(6):2104-2120. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01825.x.

They acknowledge that their paper is "an extension rather than a repudiation of previous work."

In 2012, researchers from Cornell University, using a sample of 18,000 children from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health*, concluded:

*"Eating together may protect children from depression and risky behaviours by providing a regular and comforting context to check in with parents about their day-to-day activities and to connect with them emotionally. The ability to manage a regular family dinner, however, may also be facilitated by family resources, such as time and money, or it may simply be a proxy for other, more affective, dimensions of the family environment. Indeed, we found more frequent family dinners among families with both biological parents present, a nonemployed mother, and higher income"*⁷⁴ (emphasis added).

In the *ScienceDaily* coverage of the study, lead researcher Kelly Musick said: "Family dinners also appear to be part and parcel of a broader package of practices, routines, and rituals that reflect parenting beliefs and priorities, and it's unclear how well family dinners would work unbundled from the rest of that package."⁷⁵

And in an accompanying op-ed that the researchers wrote for the *New York Times* – entitled *Is the family dinner overrated?* – the researchers said:

"The associations between family dinners and well-being were quite strong and in line with past research. But the associations were far less striking after we accounted, with the help of the data, for the ways in which families who did and didn't eat together tended to differ: for instance, in the quality of family relationships, in activities with a parent (a tally of things like moviegoing and helping with schoolwork), in parental monitoring (things like curfews and approving clothing) and in family resources (things like income and whether both parents were in the household)."

Perhaps the title of the *ScienceDaily* article identified the real issue. Does dinner make a strong family, or does a strong family make dinner?

Perhaps both are true.

In 2014, in a critique of the messages about the benefits of family dinners, and concerns that "First lady Michelle Obama has also been influential in popularising public health messages that emphasise the role that mothers play when it comes to helping children make healthy choices" (previously mentioned on page 10), professors at North Carolina State University claimed that pressure put on mothers to cook nightly meals was "a tasty illusion, one that is moralistic, and rather elitist."⁷⁶ They said:

*"The message that good parents – and in particular, good mothers – cook for their families dovetails with increasingly intensive and unrealistic standards of 'good' mothering. According to the sociologist Sharon Hays, to be a good mom today, a woman must demonstrate intense devotion to her children. One could say that home-cooked meals have become the hallmark of good mothering, stable families, and the ideal of the healthy, productive citizen. Yet in reality, home-cooked meals rarely look this good."*⁷⁷

Family dinners also appear to be part and parcel of a broader package of practices, routines, and rituals.

Does dinner make a strong family, or does a strong family make dinner?



74 Musick, K. and Meier, A. Assessing Causality and Persistence in Associations Between Family Dinners and Adolescent Well-Being (2012). *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74: 476–493. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00973.x

75 Cornell University. "Does dinner make a strong family, or does a strong family make dinner?" *ScienceDaily*. ScienceDaily, 29 May 2012, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/05/120529133513.htm>

76 Study claims family dinners are elitist, put unnecessary pressure on mothers. *Campus Reform*. 9 Sep 2014, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=5894>

77 Bowen, S; Elliott, S; Brenton, J; The Joy of Cooking? *Sage Journals* Vol 13, Issue 3, pp. 20 - 25, August 22, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504214545755>

They concluded:

"So let's move this conversation out of the kitchen, and brainstorm more creative solutions for sharing the work of feeding families. How about a revival of monthly town suppers, or healthy food trucks? Or perhaps we should rethink how we do meals in schools and workplaces, making lunch an opportunity for savoring and sharing food. Could schools offer to-go meals that families could easily heat up on busy weeknights? Without creative solutions like these, suggesting that we return to the kitchen en masse will do little more than increase the burden so many women already bear."

Interestingly, their critique was published after the 2012 study which found that Generation X men are becoming far more involved in household cooking duties (see page 41).

To be fair, the 'dissenting views' above do raise relevant issues of the effect of *family cohesion* and *family structure*, and whether the benefits of regular family dinners are *part of a bigger package* of family functioning. We discuss each of these in turn.

Family Cohesion

In 2010, the University of Minnesota examined the link between family dinners and teenage perception of the parent-child communication, surveying almost 5000 teens over a 3.5 year period.⁷⁸ Study findings suggested that families with teenagers may enhance parent-child communication and ultimately promote healthy adolescent development by making family dinners a priority:

"The general declines in perceptions of parent-child communication seen during adolescence may be attenuated by having dinner together on a regular basis... Family dinner may be more than just a time for nutritional sustenance as it is associated with higher levels of adolescent perceptions of parent-child communication. The present study findings show that parents who are present at dinner are likely to have more frequent parent-child conversations, praise their children for a job well done, monitor their children's whereabouts, and have discussions about school... although adolescent perceptions of the frequency of parent-child communication decreases over time, engaging in family dinner during the early adolescent years may be associated with adolescent perceptions of more frequent parent-child communication over time."

Sam Houston State University researchers in Texas recently examined the concept of PCC – Parent-Child Connectedness – which measures the quality of the parent-child bond and whether it is mutual and sustained over time. They argue that when PCC is high within a family, the emotional state is one of warmth, love and caring. They sought to test whether the frequency of family meals together had any effect on this, surveying 855 9-13 year olds. Their paper, published in the *Journal of Family Studies* in 2016, concluded, "*Frequency of shared family meals has a significantly positive association with the constructs for adolescent perception of frequency of parent-child communication, feeling love, emotional support, and spending time with parents.*" However, and perhaps typical of many pre-teenagers, the desire for more time by the child with the parent did not extend to wanting more parental involvement at school!⁷⁹

Families with teenagers may enhance parent-child communication and ultimately promote healthy adolescent development by making family dinners a priority.

As parents struggle with work demands and their adolescent children become more involved in academic and extra-curricular activities, shared mealtimes is often one of those family rituals first challenged and then abandoned.

78 Fulkerson, JA, Pasch KE, Stigler, MH, Farbakhsh, K, Perry, CL, Komro, KA. Longitudinal associations between family dinner and adolescent perceptions of parent-child communication among racially diverse urban youth. *Journal of family psychology*, 24(3): 261-270, 2010.

79 Stephen L. Brown, James Teufel, David A. Birch & Thereasa E. Abrams (2016): Family meals and adolescent perceptions of parent-child connectedness, *Journal of Family Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13229400.2016.1200115

The researchers commented:

"Modern families routinely struggle to balance the demands on their time. As parents struggle with work demands and their adolescent children become more involved in academic and extra-curricular activities, shared mealtimes is often one of those family rituals first challenged and then abandoned. Professionals working with families have the opportunity to educate parents about the important benefits of shared family meals, as well as encourage adolescents to be receptive to the supportive interactions associated with family meals. By doing so, they will actively foster and reinforce strong parent-child connectedness and the potential for their adolescent students to make healthier behavioural choices."

Routines may protect children from some of the risks associated with being raised in a non-traditional family.

Family Structure

In the 2010 Minnesota University study (see previous section), the researchers also had an important commentary on family structure:

"Our findings that adolescents in single parent homes may have a lower family meal frequency and perceive lower parent-child communication than adolescents in two-parent homes, are not surprising given the greater likelihood of a parent being present at a meal with children and available for conversation when there are two parents in the home. Research on nontraditional families has proposed that routines may protect children from some of the risks associated with being raised in a non-traditional family and communicating during meals may be a form of protection" (emphasis added).

In the 2012 Cornell University study of 18,000 children, referred to on page 28, researchers found more frequent family dinners among families with both biological parents present, a non-employed mother, and a higher income, and said, *"It helps to compare findings on family dinners with those on family structure, a commonly studied correlate of child well-being."*⁸⁰

A study published last year by Oxford University, entitled *Class and eating: Family meals in Britain*, surveyed 4,238 households in Great Britain, and found that *"Single parents, a notoriously time-poor category, spend the least amount of time eating with their families and have fewer commensal meals."* Shift-work was noted as a challenge to coordinating time together.⁸¹

On the other hand, a 2017 study of almost 8500 parents, led by researchers from the University of California – *Deconstructing family meals: Do family structure, gender and employment status influence the odds of having a family meal?* – found that two-parent households were not more likely to have a family dinner than single-parent households. However, they did note the following:

"In two-parent households in which the woman is employed but her partner/spouse is not, the odds of having a family dinner did not differ from households where the father was employed but the mother was not. These results substantiate prior research suggesting that the gender gap in childrearing activities and time spent with children could indeed be narrowing as more women employed in the formal labour force has coincided with the increase of time men spend with their children. These findings highlight the need for more

Shift-work was noted as a challenge to coordinating time together.

80 Musick, K. and Meier, A. Assessing Causality and Persistence in Associations Between Family Dinners and Adolescent Well-Being (2012). *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74: 476–493. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00973.x

81 Jarosz, Ewa; *Class and eating: Family meals in Britain*. *Appetite*, Volume 116, 1 September 2017, Pages 527-535

*studies focusing on how fathers' employment influences activities within the home environment, including the family meal..."*⁸²

However, they also noted that, "These findings support empirical work emphasising the strong role mothers can play in shaping and maintaining their child's dietary attitudes and practices."

A large European study published in 2014 involved 6000 children aged 10-12 years old in nine European countries.⁸³ The researchers commented:

"The differences in family meals probably reflect differences in food culture and in organising public meals, such as breakfast and lunch in schools, as well as differences between countries in the proportion of mothers engaged in working life and whether mothers are working full time or part time. When mothers worked full time, meal frequency in families was lower than that in families where mothers were not employed."

We will look at work-place factors and the effect of employers' attitudes shortly.

Part Of A Bigger Package?

The Cornell University researchers (mentioned in the preceding sections) said:

"Family dinners may be part and parcel of a broader package of practices, routines, and rituals that reflect parenting beliefs and priorities. Interventions aimed at increasing the frequency of family meals may be successful only if they can change the family habits that tend to go along with eating as a family."

The researchers suggested many factors would be overlapping and mutually reinforcing in a child's positive development.

This view was backed up in a 2009 University of Minnesota study which surveyed a sample of at-risk youth at alternative high schools with an average age of 17.3 years. The researchers argued that, "Some, but not all of the benefits of family meals found in other studies were apparent, indicating that intervention programs to promote family meals may be beneficial, but likely need increased attention to the specific needs of at-risk youth, including availability and affordability of healthful foods and family structure", adding that, "One of the prime areas for intervention with families of alternative high school students is availability and affordability of healthful foods. Promotion of family dinners could be a secondary goal once these issues are addressed."⁸⁴

The Effect Of Television & Technology

The television is often 'invited to dinner' in family homes and becomes the centre of attention and conversation for the meal. If the family is eating together, does the presence of a technological 'family member' really matter? This issue has been examined in a number of studies.

A non-scientific survey of 2000 parents by *Mother and Baby Magazine* in the UK found that 48% of children with an average age of 15 months never ate with the whole family.⁸⁵ The editor of the magazine told the BBC:

When mothers worked full time, meal frequency in families was lower than that in families where mothers were not employed.

Family dinners may be part and parcel of a broader package of practices, routines, and rituals that reflect parenting beliefs and priorities.



82 Sharif, Mienah Z. et al; Deconstructing family meals: Do family structure, gender and employment status influence the odds of having a family meal? *Appetite* Volume 114, 1 July 2017, Pages 187-193

83 Roos, E., Pajunen, T., Ray, C., Lynch, C., Kristiansdottir, Á, Halldorsson, T., . . . Yngve, A. Does eating family meals and having the television on during dinner correlate with overweight? A sub-study of the PRO GREENS project, looking at children from nine European Countries (2014). *Public Health Nutrition*, 17(11), 2528-2536.

84 Fulkerson, JA, Kubik MY, Story, M, Lytle L, Arcan C. Are there nutritional and other benefits associated with family meals among at-risk youth? *Journal of adolescent health*, 45: 389-395, 2009.

85 Toddlers eat 'horrifying' diet, BBC News 31 March 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3582259.stm>

"The modern trend for toddlers to eat alone in front of the TV is a recipe for disaster. Toddlers need the experience of sitting up at the table – it not only encourages them to eat properly, it improves their speech and social skills and encourages them to try new foods. The amount of junk food toddlers eat is horrifying. They are the nuggets and chips generation."

A 2015 study, *Cyber Safety: Balancing Screen Time*, into Australian families' use of technology, showed that almost one in five used technology during meal times, with *parents* admitting they were not good role models – 15% of parents admitted using devices during meal times, 19% of children.⁸⁶ Telstra Cyber Safety Manager Shelly Gorr said, *"If your personal set of values are that you want a device-free dinner table, in the past you would just turn off the television. Now that's been replaced by devices."*

The large European study, mentioned in the previous section, found that northern European children were significantly more likely to be overweight if they had fewer family breakfasts and more often viewed TV during dinner. The association was *almost* significant in southern & eastern Europe, possibly because of differences in foods consumed and health-related lifestyles.

In the US, a 2016 survey of parents found that more than half (57%) of parents agreed that even when they ate together as a family, some of their family members were distracted by technology.⁸⁷

A 2017 study in Ohio examined the link between the frequency of family meals, watching TV or videos during the meal, and the odds of being obese in adults.⁸⁸ Using a study sample of almost 13,000 Ohio residents, it found that adults who never watched television or videos during family meals had 37% lower odds of obesity compared with those who always did, regardless of family meal frequency.

A smaller study by researchers at Tufts University in Boston in 2001 found, *"Children from families with high television use derived, on average, 6% more of their total daily energy intake from meats; 5% more from pizza, salty snacks, and soda; and nearly 5% less of their energy intake from fruits, vegetables, and juices than did children from families with low television use"*⁸⁹ (emphasis added).

University of Minnesota researchers studied almost 5000 middle and high school students from 31 public schools, and found that teenagers watching television during family meals were found to have *lower* intakes of vegetables, dark green/yellow vegetables, calcium-rich food, grains and *higher* intakes of soft drinks, compared to adolescents not watching television during meals. But, interestingly, watching television during family meals was still associated with a *more* healthy diet than *not* eating regular family meals together at all. Once again there was an age difference. Younger adolescents were most likely not to watch TV during the family meal. Older adolescents were more likely to not be eating regular family meals in the first place.⁹⁰

If your personal set of values are that you want a device-free dinner table, in the past you would just turn off the television. Now that's been replaced by devices.

Even when they eat together as a family, some of their family members are distracted by technology.

Adults who never watched television or videos during family meals had 37% lower odds of obesity regardless of family meal frequency.

86 Australian children are falling asleep on phones and use gadgets at the dinner table, Telstra study shows. News.com.au. 28 Jan 2015, <http://www.news.com.au/technology/home-entertainment/tv/australian-children-are-falling-asleep-on-phones-and-use-gadgets-at-the-dinner-table-telstra-study-shows/news-story/cae38a801527eb77844949bc08be8c18>

87 Study shows trends in family mealtimes. Refrigerated & Frozen Foods Industry News 26 May 2016, <https://www.refrigeratedfrozenfood.com/articles/90952-study-shows-trends-in-family-mealtimes>

88 Tumin, R., Anderson, Sarah E.; Television, Home-Cooked Meals, and Family Meal Frequency: Associations with Adult Obesity. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* Volume 117, Issue 6, June 2017, Pages 937-945

89 Coon KA., Goldberg J., Rogers BL., Tucker KL., Relationships between use of television during meals and children's food consumption patters. *Pediatrics*, 107: e7, 2001.

90 Feldman, S., et al; Associations between Watching TV during Family Meals and Dietary Intake Among Adolescents. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2007;39:257-263

Looking at the socio-economic status of families, high-income families reported more family meals without TV compared with middle or low-income families.

Commenting about the television possibly being of some *benefit*, the researchers said:

"In some situations, it may be possible for TV to play a helpful role in increasing participation in family meals. Some adolescents cite a dissatisfaction with family relationships as a reason for not participating in family meals. Adolescents unhappy with family relationships may be more likely to participate in family meals if the TV is on and conversation isn't the main focus. Therefore, it is possible that TV may be able to play the role of initially bringing families together for meals without causing additional strain on family relationships, but still allowing for nutritional benefits of family meals compared to not eating together."

However, they still recommend that health care providers should work with families and teens to promote the family meal and to turn the TV off during this time.

The question of whether TV viewing during family meals makes a difference, specifically in adolescent substance abuse, was examined by researchers at the University of Minnesota.⁹¹ They concluded that while there were significant differences in rates of substance abuse for females, based on regular versus non-regular family meals, the rates were not affected by TV viewing during the meals. Their conclusion was that the benefit of family meals *"may be derived simply from having adolescents at home during mealtimes."*

As technology has increased, so has the interest in this topic. At the beginning of last year, Minnesota University researchers published a paper looking at the association of TV watching with the emotional atmosphere of the meal, nutrition and child weight status, specifically amongst low-income families.⁹² They found that, *"The presence of TV was negatively associated with the dietary healthfulness and emotional atmosphere of the meal and the child's overall dietary quality. It was positively associated with serving fast food for family meals"* (emphasis added).

They warned that even if families were not paying attention to the TV, simply having the TV on as background noise was associated with deleterious outcomes.

The message in 2007 from researchers at the University of Missouri who studied 8000 young children was clear: eat together more, and watch TV less, for a healthy weight status. While they didn't specifically examine the occurrence of watching TV during family meals, they said that food and nutrition professionals working with families to prevent and treat childhood weight problems should attend to children's time spent with screen media and the frequency of family mealtimes, amongst other things.⁹³

Ultimately, face-to-face conversations confer linguistic skills, along with the ability to hold a conversation – knowing when and how to listen and contribute.⁹⁴ This learning process is time consuming, but dinner time may be one of the few times during the day when the whole family comes together to do this.

Watching television during family meals was still associated with a more healthy diet than not eating regular family meals together.

Adolescents unhappy with family relationships may be more likely to participate in family meals if the TV is on and conversation isn't the main focus.

The presence of TV was negatively associated with the dietary healthfulness and emotional atmosphere of the meal.

91 Eisenberg, M E., et al; Does TV viewing during family meals make a difference in adolescent substance use? Preventive Medicine Volume 48, Issue 6, June 2009, Pages 585-587

92 Trofholz, Amanda C. et al; Associations between TV viewing at family meals and the emotional atmosphere of the meal, meal healthfulness, child dietary intake, and child weight status. Appetite Volume 108, 1 January 2017, Pages 361-366

93 Gable, Sara et al. Television Watching and Frequency of Family Meals Are Predictive of Overweight Onset and Persistence in a National Sample of School-Aged Children. Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics , Volume 107 , Issue 1 , 53 - 61

94 Abu-Akel A 2002. The psychological and social dynamics of topic performance in family dinnertime conversation. J Pragmatics 2002;34:1787–806.

In *We Need To Talk: Screen time in New Zealand – An emerging factor in child and adolescent health*, a research paper written for Family First NZ in 2015, UK biologist / psychologist Dr Aric Sigman said:

*"In addition to the influence of food advertising, studies of children's eating behaviour in direct response to screen viewing suggest it can act as a distraction away from vital satiation food cues toward non-food cues (the screen), thereby disrupting the development of satiation to food and, therefore, increasing food intake while children are viewing. The brain may be monitoring external, non-food cues – the television screen – rather than internal food cues telling us that we have eaten enough. Experiments have found that when distracted in this way we continue to salivate in response to more and more food when normally we would not. A study concluded that watching television can disrupt the natural link between appetite and eating. A US study found that even children who watched a below average amount of television (less than three hours a day for an average of 2.7 days a week) ate roughly the equivalent of an extra meal a day more than those who watched none... And the effects on increased appetite may continue long after the screen is turned off and viewing stops because the screen engagement may prevent our brains from subconsciously memorising what we're currently eating – potentially a key aspect of appetite regulation. Eating a meal while viewing screens is thought to disrupt the encoding and memory formation of the meal. Impaired memory for recent eating may increase food intake hours after viewing stops."*⁹⁵

Screen engagement may prevent our brains from subconsciously memorising what we're currently eating – potentially a key aspect of appetite regulation.

As mentioned earlier in this report (page 12), an online poll of 515 *Food Magazine* readers in 2012 found that more than half of New Zealanders ate dinner in front of the television three or more nights a week – a quarter admitting to the habit every night.⁹⁶ However, it should be noted that this was based on an unscientific survey.

Clinical nutritionist Linda Outhwaite was quoted in the magazine, saying:

"We miss out on the taste and texture as the food is consumed without much focus and usually clean our plate absent-mindedly whether we are hungry or not. Watching television is often associated with high-calorie but nutrient-poor food and often the fridge or pantry are trawled, during the ad breaks, for the next thing we can pop into our mouths."

The Effect Of Deprivation

As mentioned earlier in this report, Auckland University's *Youth'12: The Health and Wellbeing of New Zealand Secondary School Students in 2012*, which surveyed 8500 secondary school students, found that 62% of students reported that their families had eaten together five or more times in the past week. Students from lower deprivation (wealthier) neighbourhoods were more likely to eat family meals together (66%) than students from higher deprivation (poorer) neighbourhoods (58%).⁹⁷

Watching television is often associated with high-calorie but nutrient-poor food.

95 Sigman, Aric. *We Need To Talk: Screen time in New Zealand – An emerging factor in child and adolescent health*. Report to Family First New Zealand (2015), <https://www.familyfirst.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/WE-NEED-TO-TALK-Screentime-Full-Report.pdf>

96 TV dinners are bad for health, experts claim. NZ Herald. 17 September 2012, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10834494

97 *Youth'12: The Health and Wellbeing of New Zealand Secondary School Students in 2012*. Adolescent Health Research Group, (2012). Initial Findings. Auckland: The University of Auckland

This is consistent with the polling released earlier this year by Curia Market Research⁹⁸ (covered on page 9) which found that families in high deprivation (low-income) areas (deciles 8-10*) were *less* likely to see family dinners as important compared to families in less deprived (wealthier) areas, and also were *less* likely to be sitting down together for dinner four or more nights per week.

Importance of family dinners by deprivation

		Deciles 1 - 3	Deciles 4 - 7	Deciles 8 - 10
		Col %	Col %	Col %
Importance of family dinners	Very important	73%	71%	57%
	Somewhat important	20%	22%	19%
	Not very important	1%	2%	6%
	Not at all important	5%	1%	16%
	Unsure/refuse	1%	5%	1%
	Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Curia Market Research. Family Dinner Poll. December 2017.

Question - "How important is it for your family to have dinner together as a family on a regular basis?"

Weekly family dinners by deprivation

		Deciles 1 - 3	Deciles 4 - 7	Deciles 8 - 10
		Col %	Col %	Col %
Weekly family dinners	1	13%	6%	17%
	2	4%	2%	11%
	3	3%	5%	7%
	4	14%	10%	9%
	5	17%	13%	22%
	6	7%	17%	5%
	7	33%	34%	18%
	Unsure	9%	13%	10%
	Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Curia Market Research. Family Dinner Poll. December 2017.

Question - "On average how many nights a week would most of your family have dinner together?"

Studies have shown that lower-income families can lack time and energy to prepare and arrange meals together, and that snacking and fast-food outlets can be used as a coping strategy.⁹⁹ A study published last year by Oxford University, entitled *Class and eating: Family meals in Britain*, examined this issue in further depth.¹⁰⁰ They surveyed 4238 households in Great Britain, and found that higher *educated* individuals had more frequent family meals, and more *affluent* individuals spent more *time* at the table with household members.

*According to the Ministry of Health, decile 10 refers to high deprivation (low socio-economic) and decile 1 is low deprivation (high socio-economic). This is the opposite to the decile system used by the Ministry of Education for school funding, where decile 1 schools are from low socio-economic areas, and decile 10 schools from high socio-economic (wealthier) areas.

98 Curia Market Research. Family Dinner Poll. December 2017, <https://www.familyfirst.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Family-Dinner-Poll-Results-Dec-2017.pdf>

99 Devine, C., Jastran, M., Jabs, J., Wethington, E., Farrell, T., & Bisogni, C. (2006). "A lot of sacrifices": Work-family spillover and the food choice coping strategies of low wage employed parents. *Social Science and Medicine*, 63(10), 2591e2603.

100 Jarosz, Ewa; Class and eating: Family meals in Britain. *Appetite*, Volume 116, 1 September 2017, Pages 527-535

Interestingly, they noted, “Income is positively associated with how much time people spend at the table with other household members, but not with how often they eat with them. This suggests that more affluent individuals may have longer but not more frequent family meals” (emphasis added).

Not surprisingly, shift-work was noted as a challenge to coordinating time together. The researchers commented that weekend meals were longer and more frequent, and suggested weekends bore special significance for family meals – for example, the Saturday or Sunday night ‘roast’, or weekend BBQ, or the Sunday family lunch.

Workplace Factors

Work / life balance and flexible work hours have been touted as important for families. Researchers at the University of Minnesota and Columbia University surveyed adolescents and then followed them up as young adults 10 years later. In a comment on work / life balance and work-based policies, they said:

“Results from the current study may also help bolster the evidence-base for pushing efforts forward to create workplace policies and procedures that allow for parents to have more flexible hours, benefits for less than full time employment, and providing employees greater control over where and when their work is done in order for families to have more frequent family meals.”¹⁰¹

Two other studies have specifically looked at this issue and its relationship with family dinners and what is consumed during those meals.

In 2008, University of Florida researchers said, “Supervisors are likely the main conduit through which employees can negotiate flexibility and other supportive work conditions. Thus, the presence of a family-supportive supervisor seems to be key to the facilitation of family dining... Supervisors who act as role models by leaving work themselves to engage in family dinners may encourage such behaviours among employees.” They also commented:

“Flexplace offers individuals the ability to work from home, eliminating commute time. Lack of a commute not only increases the time available to engage in home-meal preparation, but it may also reduce the temptation to stop at a fast food restaurant. That is, because individuals are already in their home it is simpler to prepare a meal than to exit the home and drive to a fast food location... Several studies have also found associations between WIF (work interfering with family) and health indicators such as obesity and health behaviours such as diet and exercise...It may be beneficial to engage in workplace health promotion practices aimed at recognising the importance of the family dinner and how work role factors can be managed to better facilitate family dinners and healthy food choices...employer requirements such as long hours and face time can result in employees who are dysfunctional in their roles as spouses or parents” (emphasis added).¹⁰²

Brigham Young University (Utah) family scientist Jenet Jacob and colleagues analysed data from 1580 IBM employees who were parents. Their 2008 study found that employees who could get home for dinner felt they worked in a healthy environment.¹⁰³ “In our study, the level of interference with dinnertime

Weekend meals were longer and more frequent.

The presence of a family-supportive supervisor seems to be key to the facilitation of family dining.

Employer requirements such as long hours and face time can result in employees who are dysfunctional in their roles as spouses or parents.

101 Berge et al; The Protective Role of Family Meals for Youth Obesity: 10-Year Longitudinal Associations. The Journal of Pediatrics 2015;166:296-301.

102 Allen, Tammy D., et al; Workplace factors associated with family dinner behaviours. Journal of Vocational Behaviour 73 (2008) 336-342

103 Jacob, J. I., Allen, S., Hill, E. J., Mead, N. L. and Ferris, M. (2008), Work Interference with Dinnertime as a Mediator and Moderator Between Work Hours and Work and Family Outcomes. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 36: 310–327. doi:10.1177/1077727X08316025

was related to a perception of a healthy workplace, and that's connected to job retention and productivity," Jacob told *BYU News*.¹⁰⁴

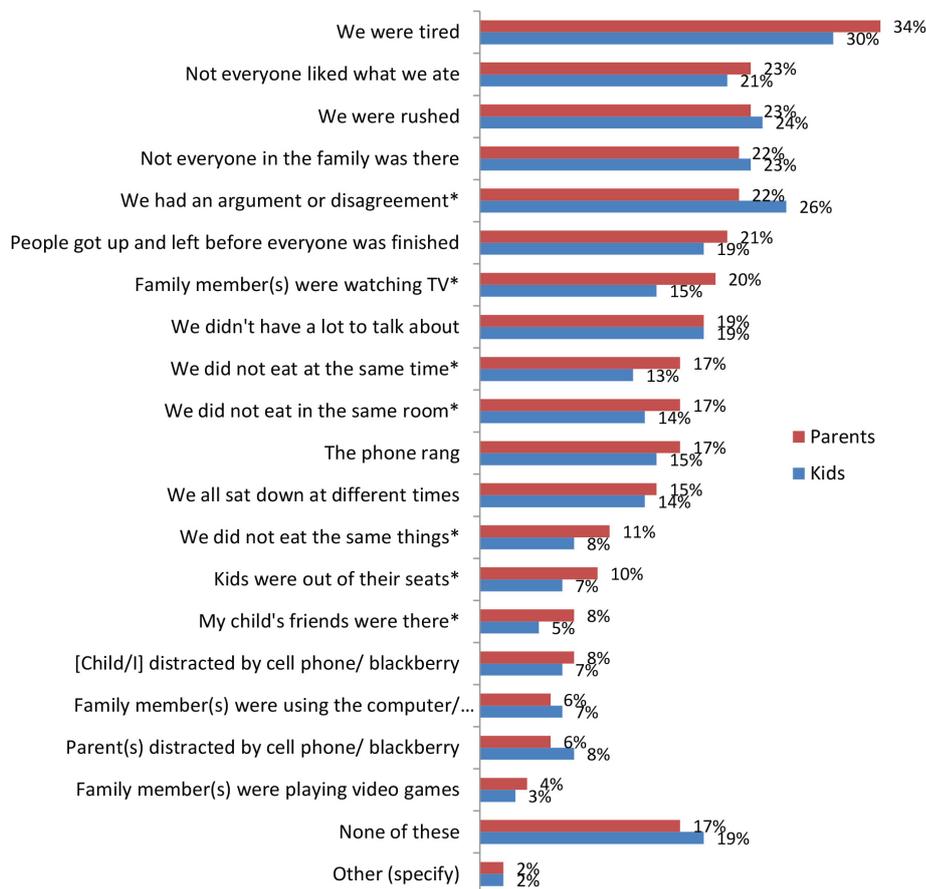
The study also found that making it home for dinner evened the scales for women trying to balance long work hours with family life. The researchers said, "These findings provide strong support for the potential role of dinnertime in reducing the negative work, personal, and family outcomes associated with long work hours and conflict in the work – family interface. This shows bosses can get more out of employees if they're having dinner. Parents, not just kids, benefit from time spent eating together."

Parents, not just kids, benefit from time spent eating together.

Other Obstacles

The *Barilla Family Dinner Project* (previously explained on page 12) asked about the barriers to a quality family dinner. The top reasons for not enjoying family dinners were tiredness, dissatisfaction with the food, being rushed, family members being absent, and arguments during the dinner.

Barriers to a quality family dinner



* indicates statistically significant difference between parent and child responses at 90% confidence interval.

Q16f. Now think about the last time you had a family dinner when you **DID NOT** feel really close to your family or enjoy being together. Which of these describe the things that prevented you from feeling this way?

Source: Barilla Family Dinner Project, *Share the Table: Benefits of the Family Dinner for Parents and Children, A White Paper Study (2010)*

It is interesting to note that this is a 2010 study, and “cell phones” have not become the distraction they are today. How times have changed!

A 2008 paper entitled *Reclaiming the family table: Mealtimes and child health and wellbeing* by the Society for Research in Child Development (US) identified five common obstacles to family mealtimes, and suggested strategies to overcome them:¹⁰⁵

- **Parent schedules**
Coordinating nights when parents work late so they can be home on the same nights for dinner
- **Child schedules**
Limiting activities that interfere with dinner time; advocating for community and school based organisations to schedule around dinner
- **Preparation time**
Re-frame this time as an investment in freshness and an opportunity to save money and teach cooking skills to children
- **Shopping time**
Re-frame this time as an investment in freshness, learning what foods are in season in your region, trying new stores and farmers’ markets, allowing children to participate and teaching them how to be smart consumers
- **Knowledge and skills**
Community and online resources can provide ideas on how to prepare meals that are wholesome, yet not too time consuming

82% of parents feel closer to their kids and 72% of kids feel closer to their parents when they have dinner together.

70% of kids appreciate their parent(s) more when they take time to share a meal together.

The View Of Families

The *Barilla Family Dinner Project*’s online survey of 1000 parents and 1000 children in 2010 identified three key areas that specifically drives the good feelings towards family dinners:¹⁰⁶

- **Feelings of Closeness**
82% of parents feel closer to their kids and 72% of kids feel closer to their parents when they have dinner together.
78% of parents say they feel closer to their spouse when they have a family dinner.
- **Appreciation**
71% of parents say they feel more appreciated by their children when they take time to have dinner together.
70% of kids, in turn, actually do appreciate their parent(s) more when they take time to share a meal together.
- **Relaxation**
65% of parents report that they and their spouse generally feel less stressed when they eat dinner together as a family.
61% of kids agree that their parents are more relaxed and fun to be around when they have dinner together.

Tweens are even more likely than teens to consider time spent connecting with family to be a priority.

105 Fiese, BH, Schwartz, M. Reclaiming the family table: Mealtimes and child health and wellbeing. Social Policy Report. Vo. XXII: No. IV, 3-20, 2008

106 Doherty, Dr. William. Share the Table: Benefits of the Family Dinner for Parents and Children, A White Paper Study, <http://www.sharethetable.com/docs/BenefitsofTheFamilyDinnerWhitePaper.pdf>

When asked what happened at the dinner table which made them feel positive, top responses included, “we laughed”, “we were not in a hurry”, “we were all relaxed”, and “everyone talked / was part of the conversation.”

Teens having frequent family dinners were more likely to have high-quality relationships with their parents.

The View Of Teens

The *Barilla Family Dinner Project* researchers also said that tweens (pre-teen) are even more likely than teens to consider time spent connecting with family to be a priority.

The *National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA Columbia)* surveyed thousands of American teens and their parents for 18 years to identify factors associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood of teen substance use. In 2011, they asked teens what they considered to be the best part of family dinners, other than the food:¹⁰⁷

What would you consider to be the best part of family dinners, other than the food?

Responses	Percent
Share/catch up/talk/interact/conversation	54
Sitting down/being together	11
Spending time with family or particular individuals	6
Humor/laughing/jokes	5
Watch TV/movies	3
Cooking/doing things together	1
Other	2
No response/don't know	19

Source: *The Importance of Family Dinners VII. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse*

In 2012, they asked more detailed questions of the teens.¹⁰⁸ They found that teens having frequent family dinners were more likely to have high-quality relationships with their parents.

Compared to teens who had dinner with their parents five to seven times a week, teens who had fewer than three family dinners per week were:

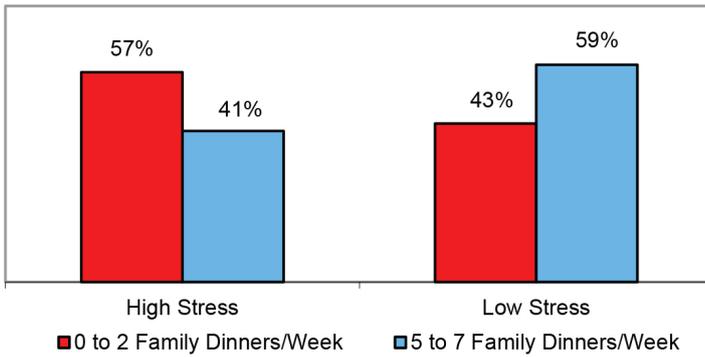
- more likely to be highly stressed
- almost three times likelier to say it's okay for teens to use marijuana
- three and a half times likelier to say it's okay for teens to get drunk
- twice as likely to say they expect to try drugs

Teens who had fewer than three family dinners per week were almost three times likelier to say it's okay for teens to use marijuana.

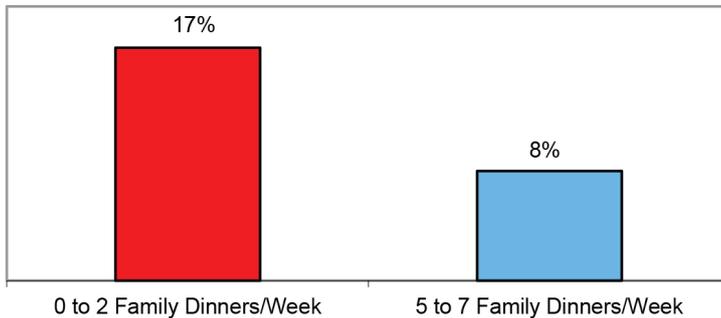
107 The Importance of Family Dinners VII. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2011>

108 The Importance of Family Dinners VIII. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2012>

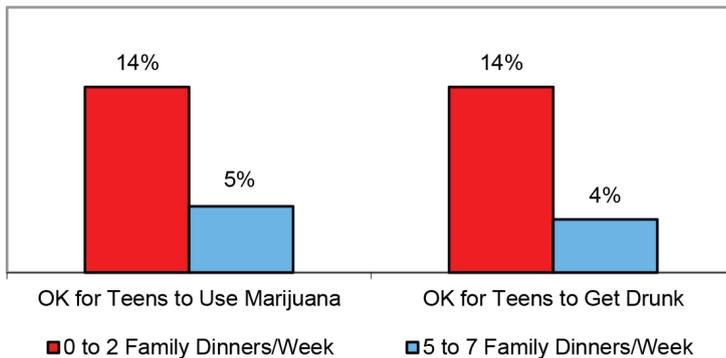
Teen stress level by frequency of family dinners



Teens who say they are very/somewhat likely to try drugs in the future by frequency of family dinners



Teens' view of substance use by frequency of family dinners



Source: *The Importance of Family Dinners VIII. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University*

Mothers Matter

The importance of mothers was mentioned earlier (page 24) when referencing a University of Queensland study.¹⁰⁹ This study highlighted that a healthy maternal attitude to family eating and diet was more important than the frequency of shared meals: *"The odds of being overweight at age 14 were greater among those whose mothers stated that it was not important that the family ate together."*

The large European study which looked at 6000 10-12 year old children in nine European countries found that when mothers worked full time, meal frequency in families was lower than that in families where mothers were not employed.¹¹⁰

A healthy maternal attitude to family eating and diet was more important than the frequency of shared meals.

109 Mamun, A. A., Lawlor, D. A., O'Callaghan, M. J., Williams, G. M. and Najman, J. M. (2005), Positive Maternal Attitude to the Family Eating Together Decreases the Risk of Adolescent Overweight. *Obesity Research*, 13: 1422-1430. doi:10.1038/oby.2005.172

110 Roos, E., Pajunen, T., Ray, C., Lynch, C., Kristiansdottir, Á, Halldorsson, T., . . . Yngve, A. Does eating family meals and having the television on during dinner correlate with overweight? A sub-study of the PRO GREENS project, looking at children from nine European Countries (2014). *Public Health Nutrition*, 17(11), 2528-2536.

A Texas A&M University study also identified the mother's attitude as important. In a 2010 study of 300 families, they concluded, "As mothers' perception of the importance of family dinners increased, so too did their children's perception that eating dinner with family was important and the likelihood that the child would eat dinner with the family."¹¹¹ They said:

"Mothers who work longer hours are more likely to rely upon fast food at dinner time and have children who perceive eating dinner with family as less important; mothers who spend more time commuting are more likely to report time pressures when preparing dinner."

However, their additional comments will give comfort to hard-working mums:

"The work of caring is likely to remain gendered; however, some fathers have begun to take on more of the responsibilities associated with the work of caring. Thus, it is not surprising that while mothers are far more likely than fathers to have the primary food role in families, men are becoming more involved in food preparation. Our own time diary data suggest that wives devote less time to meal preparation when their husbands devote more time to this task. Consequently, the role of fathers in providing family meals is expected to become more important in the future" (emphasis added).

Dads In The Kitchen

The argument has been made that by encouraging more home-based dinners, this is just condemning mothers, especially, to a life of servitude in the kitchen.¹¹²

That's not necessarily the case. Researchers from the University of Michigan have followed the lifestyle habits of a group of 3000 Generation X adults – men and women born between the years 1961 and 1981 – and here's the good news:

"Gen X men are more involved in all aspects of meal preparation – from grocery shopping to cooking – than their fathers were. These men spend more time in the kitchen than their dads did, cooking about eight meals a week and buying groceries more than once a week... Gen X men also watch cooking shows and read magazine articles on cooking just as much as women do."¹¹³

According to the study author:

"In previous generations, there was often a disparity, and the husband's job brought in more money or was more time consuming. That's not the case anymore. Now there is much more parity between genders and in many cases, the woman makes more. That means there is a reallocation of time and duties for these people."

There wasn't quite gender 'equality' though – even amongst Gen Xers. The research found married women still cooked the most, and prepared about 12 meals a week. Single women cooked about 10 meals a week, and both married and single men cooked about eight meals weekly.

A 2016 survey of US parents found that mums were still primarily in charge of cooking family meals (65%) compared to dad (16%), kids (9%), grandparents (4%), and others (6%).¹¹⁴

While mothers are far more likely than fathers to have the primary food role in families, men are becoming more involved in food preparation.



Gen X men are more involved in all aspects of meal preparation than their fathers were.

111 McIntosh, William Alex, et al; Mothers and meals. The effects of mothers' meal planning and shopping motivations on children's participation in family meals. *Appetite* 55 (2010) 623–628

112 Study claims family dinners are elitist, put unnecessary pressure on mothers. *Campus Reform*. 9 Sep 2014, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=5894>

113 Generation X Report: Men Spend More Time in the Kitchen. *Time Magazine*. 30 April 2012, <http://healthland.time.com/2012/04/30/generation-x-men-spend-more-time-in-the-kitchen/>

114 Study shows trends in family mealtimes. *Refrigerated & Frozen Foods Industry News* 26 May 2016, <https://www.refrigeratedfrozenfood.com/articles/90952-study-shows-trends-in-family-mealtimes>

Quality vs. Quantity - Keeping It Positive

A 2011 study, while looking specifically at health outcomes for children with asthma, made some interesting comments in relation to reducing *overall family stress*. It said that open and direct forms of communication at family mealtimes were associated with *"more optimal outcomes for children."*

The researchers from the University of Illinois observed three aspects during the family mealtimes of 200 families:

- the amount of time that a family member was physically away from the group, talking on the phone, watching television, or engaged with an electronic device
- the amount of time spent engaging in overly restrictive behaviours during mealtimes ("Eat your peas!", "Stop hitting your sister")
- communication at the table, including about the food, expressing genuine concern for each other, and any critical forms of communication

As they discussed policy implications, their comments went far wider than just relating to families with a child who has asthma:

"First, it is important to emphasise that family mealtimes last only about 18 minutes, on average, and are casual affairs. The notion that family meals must be complicated, elaborate affairs can dissuade parents from engaging in this important activity."

"Second, families need guidance and support in creating communication strategies for their mealtimes. It may not be enough to suggest that families eat together four or more times a week if they come prepared to criticise, control, or avoid conversation altogether. Our analyses of time spent in this brief encounter suggests that families who spent seven or more minutes, on average, disengaged with each other by watching television, talking on the phone, or being otherwise disengaged from the mealtime conversation had children who experienced poorer health. These can also be families who experience more economic and parenting pressures in their lives by virtue of being single parents and having less educational resources available to them. This suggests a need to assist families to more effectively communicate and find compelling ways to remain at the table while shutting out distractions, a notion that may be particularly necessary in our current culture so often espousing the virtues associated with 'multitasking'" (emphasis added).

They concluded:

*"Just as children's safety became a national priority through campaigns and legislation surrounding seat belt use, raising awareness and investing in public support for healthy family mealtimes would not only be money well spent but may also be as simple as ABC."*¹¹⁵

This important aspect of the 'tone' of the conversation was mentioned earlier, under the section "Preventing Eating Disorders". University of Minnesota researchers asked whether the *communication* during the meal limited the benefits – for example, where family members talked negatively about food and eating, or where the atmosphere at the family meal wasn't positive.¹¹⁶ Their

It is important to emphasise that family mealtimes last only about 18 minutes, on average, and are casual affairs.



The notion that family meals must be complicated, elaborate affairs can dissuade parents from engaging in this important activity.

115 Fiese, BH, Winter MA, Botti JC. The ABCs of family mealtimes: Observational lessons for promoting healthy outcomes for children. *Child Development*. 82 (1): 133-145, 2011.

116 Loth K, Wall M, Choi C-W, et al. Family meals and disordered eating in adolescents: Are the Benefits the Same for Everyone? *The International journal of eating disorders*. 2015;48(1):100-110. doi:10.1002/eat.22339.

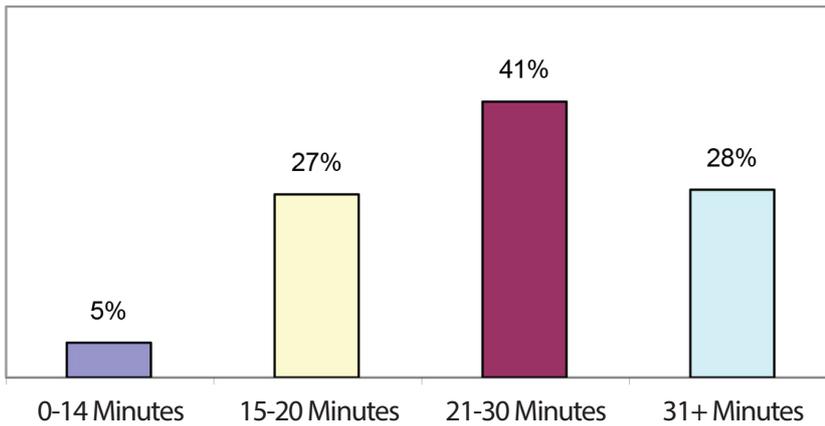
conclusion is worth repeating:

"It might be that for girls who ... have been exposed to family weight teasing or high levels of weight talk, sharing a meal with the family does not offer the same safety or protection against the use of disordered eating, as compared with girls living in a family environment that is characterised by positive family functioning and free of weight-based conversations" (emphasis added).

It may not be enough to suggest that families eat together four or more times a week if they come prepared to criticise, control, or avoid conversation altogether.

Length Of Family Dinners

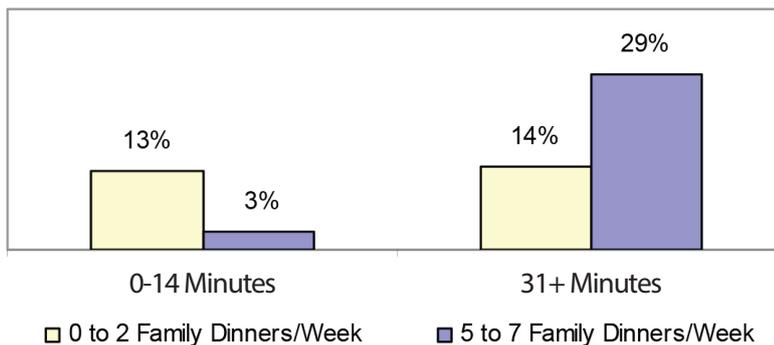
Teens report length of family dinners



Source: *The Importance of Family Dinners VII. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2011)*

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA Columbia) surveyed thousands of American teens, asking them how long dinner with family usually lasts.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, teens who had fewer than three family dinners per week were four times likelier to say dinner lasted less than 15 minutes compared to teens who had five to seven family dinners per week.

Length of family dinners by frequency of family dinners



Source: *The Importance of Family Dinners VII. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2011)*

And as just mentioned on the previous page, University of Illinois researchers found that family mealtimes last only about 18 minutes, on average. However, families who spent seven or more minutes *disengaged* with each other, by watching television, talking on the phone, or being otherwise disengaged from the mealtime conversation, undid some of the benefits of eating together.¹¹⁸

This suggests a need to assist families to more effectively communicate and find compelling ways to remain at the table while shutting out distractions.

117 The Importance of Family Dinners VII. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2011>

118 Fiese, BH, Winter MA, Botti JC. The ABCs of family mealtimes: Observational lessons for promoting healthy outcomes for children. *Child Development*. 82 (1): 133-145, 2011.

It seems the more often you do it – and do it well – the longer families are willing to spend time having dinner together. Practice makes perfect.

Policy Recommendations - Strategies To Encourage Family Dinners

In a 2008 paper entitled *Does the family environment contribute to food habits or behaviours and physical activity in children?* written for the Scientific Committee of the Agencies for Nutrition Action (now called Activity and Nutrition Aotearoa), academics from the University of Otago and Auckland made recommendations to the Ministries of Health, Education and Social Development. Here are some excerpts:

Family mealtimes

Recommendation for parents: Family mealtimes should be maintained as positive occasions as much as possible.

Strategies:

- Describe mealtimes as a family tradition.
- Help all family members to learn to prepare quick, healthful meals.
- Look for realistic ways to increase the number of family meals, taking into account work, school, and extracurricular activities.
- Adopt age-appropriate ways to involve children and adolescents in meal planning and preparation. For example, young children can open tinned ingredients, stir meals, set the table, get the water jug for the table, decide what to have tomorrow night.
- Encourage children to sit down with you to share a meal (at a table, or in a designated eating space facing each other – not in front of the TV).
- Set a time when you'll be eating together and let the family know in advance.

Television viewing and interruptions during mealtimes

Recommendation for parents: Turn the TV off during mealtimes.

Strategies:

- Negotiate and plan the number of TV programmes the family wants to watch at the beginning of the week and don't watch any others.

Parental modelling

Recommendation for parents: Eat a healthy diet and undertake 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per day yourself.

Strategies:

- Eat meals together as a family.
- Walk, play, dance and be active together as a family. Make activity fun to do.
- Make a healthy lunch and take it to work.

It seems the more often you do it – and do it well – the longer families are willing to spend time having dinner together.

Help all family members to learn to prepare quick, healthful meals.

Family mealtimes should be maintained as positive occasions as much as possible.

Parental support

Recommendation for parents: Support and encourage all attempts by the child to follow healthy eating patterns and being active.

Strategies:

- Create a supportive food environment by having healthy foods easily available, and keeping unhealthy foods to small portions or out of the house altogether.
- Pack a healthy lunch rather than giving children "lunch-money".
- Create a supportive activity environment by providing safe play spaces, and by helping children get to other play spaces and activities/sports.

Family interaction

Recommendation for parents: Maintain a positive emotional atmosphere during family meals.

Strategies:

- Avoid arguments during family mealtimes.
- Encourage all family members to talk during mealtimes, perhaps by taking turns in the family to talk about a good thing that happened to you that day.

As we discussed under the section "Nutrition", a study just published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour* analysed the link between early life cooking skills and nutrition later on, and found:

"Reporting adequate cooking skills at age 18–23 years was associated with usual involvement in meal preparation, having frequent family meals, greater vegetable consumption, and lower consumption of fast food later in life."¹¹⁹

In the Massey University survey last year (mentioned on page 23), Associate Professor Carol Wham of Massey University said, *"Developing the ability to prepare a simple healthy meal will empower children and their families to access and enjoy nutritious meals within their own budgetary, cultural, social and time constraints."*¹²⁰

Schools have a role to play in using the cooking skills curriculum to increase the likelihood of students creating healthy family-based dinners both in the present, and in the future.

The University of Florida released a paper in 2012 entitled *Family Nutrition: The Truth About Family Meals*. It gave the following helpful tips:

HOW TO GET THE WHOLE FAMILY TO THE DINNER TABLE

- *Make shared family meals a priority. Emphasise the importance of being together, not creating an elaborate meal that everyone will enjoy. Set regular meal times by writing them on the calendar. Let everyone know when dinner is served and when they must be home.*
- *If the family is not used to eating together regularly, start small. At first, get used to eating together by scheduling family meals two or three days per week. Then, as the 3 weeks progress, begin to have more and more regular meals.*

Set a time when you'll be eating together and let the family know in advance.

Adopt age-appropriate ways to involve children and adolescents in meal planning and preparation.

Let the family know in advance.

If the family is not used to eating together regularly, start small.

119 Utter, Jennifer et al. Self-Perceived Cooking Skills in Emerging Adulthood Predict Better Dietary Behaviours and Intake 10 Years Later: A Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, Volume 50, Issue 5, 494 - 500

120 Veges don't make the cut in school kitchens, Massey University. 23 May 2017, http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/about-massey/news/article.cfm?mnanrticle_uuid=02228075-ADD6-535A-1609-22519203DDFE

- *Make family meals fun. Include children in the preparation of the meal and in the decision about what foods will be offered during the meal. Of course, parents have final say about what foods are prepared, but allowing the children to participate can create a fun environment.*
- *Keep a sense of humour while at the dinner table.*
- *Eliminate distractions, like TV, telephone, and cell phones.*
- *Try to limit the conversations to positive or neutral topics. Do not let the conversation get out of hand and allow family members to criticise one another. Keep it light and fun. Create an environment that leads to healthy communication.*
- *Be a good role model. Show children good etiquette and table manners.*
- *Eat slowly. Remember, this is an opportunity for the family to spend time together. Do not make it about the food; make it about the family.¹²¹*

Please be reassured that it is highly unlikely that any family will achieve 100% on the checklists and strategies in this section. None of our families can live up to the 'Walton family' ideal! However, they do indicate areas which individual families may identify as having 'room for improvement'.

CONCLUSION

Parents may be keener to make the effort to plan for, prepare, and schedule family dinners if they are aware of the extent to which the whole process will benefit and protect their family in a number of ways.

Surveys suggest that most parents and young people have a positive view about having dinner together as a family. When they 'work', regular family dinners help make great memories and strengthen the bonds of those present.

Unfortunately, they can also be 'negative' experiences – when a family member is talking on the phone, distracted by a television programme, or engaged with an electronic device; when the amount of time is spent engaging in overly restrictive behaviours ("Eat your peas!"); or when there are negative or critical forms of communication during the meal. It may not be enough to suggest that families eat together five or more times a week if they come prepared to criticise, control, or avoid conversation altogether.

To this end, we believe that social marketing campaigns should be designed to promote and to encourage families to have regular family dinners, whilst also acknowledging that, with busy schedules, it will not always be possible. The *intent* is important.

As part of this campaign, online resources to encourage families should include simple tips to help families prepare simple cost-effective meals, hints for keeping the mealtime as positive as possible, ways to involve children and teens in the meal planning and preparation, healthy eating options, and encouragement to turn off the TV and devices while at the table.

The private sector (including food manufacturers) could be part of this 'campaign' – offering special discounts on health family-focused dinner meals;

Encourage all family members to talk during mealtimes.

Create an environment that leads to healthy communication.

When they 'work', regular family dinners help make great memories and strengthen the bonds of those present.

With busy schedules, it will not always be possible. The intent is important.

121 Forthun, L., Family Nutrition: The Truth About Family Meals. Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida (2012)

providing recipes specifically for family dinner meals; publishing creative ideas for low-cost easy-to-prepare nutritious meals; and simply promoting the concept and the important of eating together.

A recent example of this is the excellent initiative of *Love Food Hate Waste NZ* who have provided a seasonal meal planner for families on a budget.¹²² For around \$60 a week, a family of six can eat five dinner meals using a free meal planner booklet from *Easy Choice – Family Kai*.

The evidence is persuasive. When *any* family-based activity has the potential to help children deal with the pressures of adolescence and peer pressure, improve their well-being and nutrition, and strengthen family bonds, we should give it priority.

And when we add the potential of this activity to help decrease the likelihood of suicidal thoughts, binge drinking, smoking and marijuana use, sexual activity, obesity, and eating disorders, it seems a 'slam-dunk' that families should schedule as many dinners together during the week as possible – even when competing with busy work and school schedules.

For low-income and time-pressed families, the best encouragement we can give is to start small and intentionally. Even adding an extra night or two on the current weekly trend could make a noticeable difference to family life.

The notion that family meals must be complicated elaborate affairs can dissuade parents from engaging in this important activity. The emphasis should be on the importance of being together, not necessarily creating a *My Kitchen Rules*-winning meal!

The more often you do it – gathering over a simple quickly-prepared meal, accompanied by a serving of conversation and topped with care – the longer families are willing to spend time having dinner together.

Don't make it about the food – make it about the family. It's worth the effort. It's time for dinner.



Emphasise the importance of being together, not creating an elaborate meal.

Even adding an extra night or two on the current weekly trend could make a noticeable difference to family life.

Gather over a simple quickly-prepared meal, accompanied by a serving of conversation and topped with care.

Do not make it about the food – make it about the family.

¹²² Love Food Hate Waste NZ, <https://lovefoodhatewaste.co.nz/easy-choice-meal-planner>

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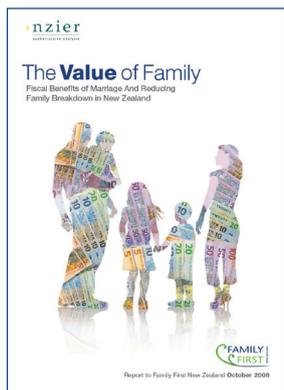
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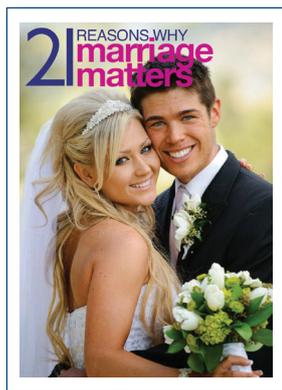
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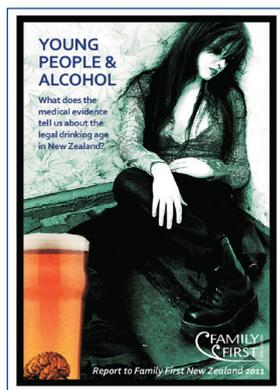
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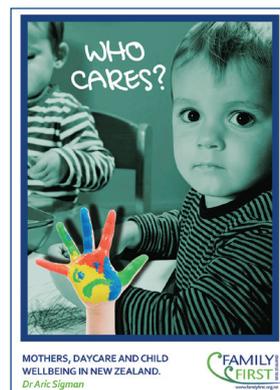
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2009



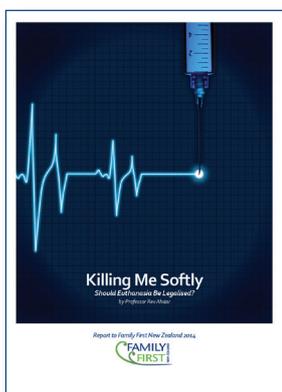
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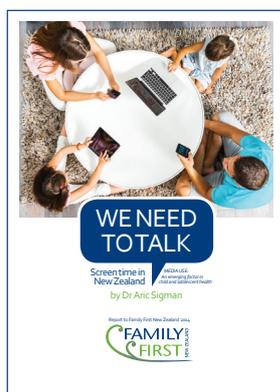
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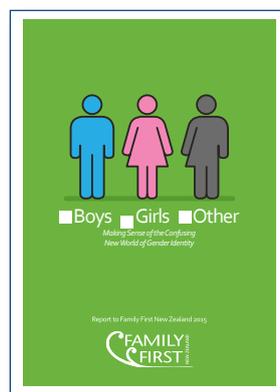
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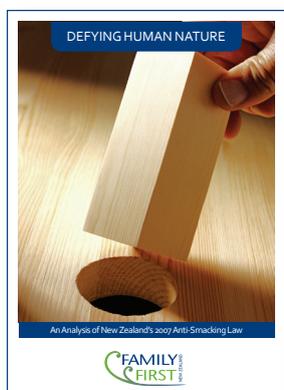
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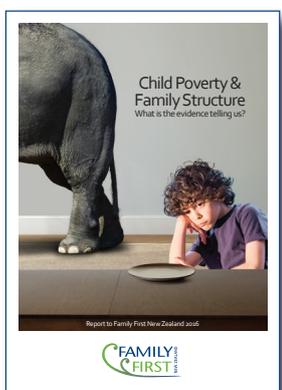
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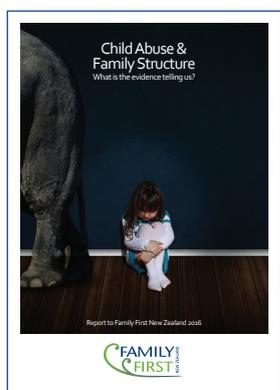
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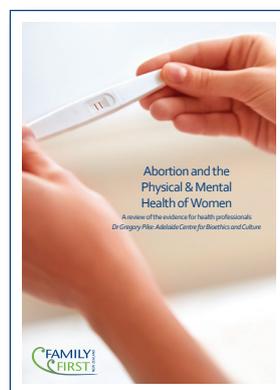
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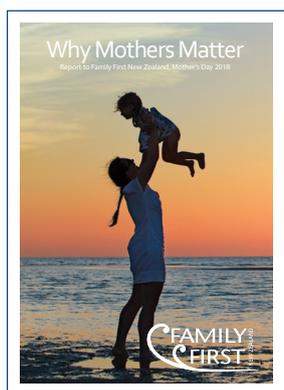
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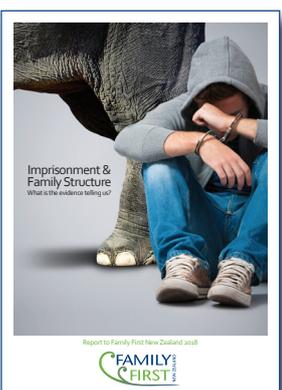
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