

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



It's time for dinner

The Effect Of Regular Family Dinners On Family Life

Report to Family First New Zealand 2018



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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

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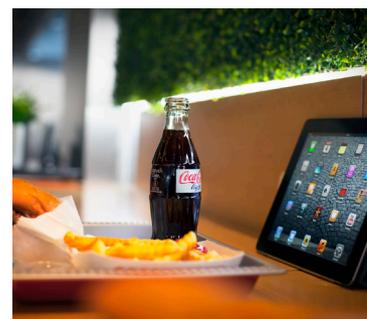
with addictive substances, or with peers who are a 'bad influence' on the adolescent.

- **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

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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.

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