



The Truth About Family Meals



[1]American's dining room practices have changed over time (see our story *Have Families Always Eaten Did American Families Always Eat Together?*) **But never have there been more distractions and more alternatives to dissuade us from eating at home as a family.** Ten years ago the Gallup Poll told us kids were taking part in more after-school activities than ever, with parents going straight from work to soccer practice, piano lessons, or car pools. Gallup researchers concluded there simply wasn't much time available for cooking, and therefore eating was more often done on the run. They looked at numbers, as researchers do.

Today 43% of American households cook dinner at home six or seven nights per week, with 31% cooking at home every night. 77% of children and youth eat meals with their families four or more times per week and 39% do so all seven nights. While this sounds great, **CBS News' *How And Where America Eats* reports, "fewer Americans with children dine together every night now than did so 15 years ago."**

What's the big deal? Surely we can survive as a nation without families eating most of their meals together. But can we? Is there a difference in behavior, success in school, or health that is tied to this? Are there more than just social or nutritional benefits when we share the bounty of food as a family? ***It turns out that the more family meals eaten together (especially at home and without television or devices), the better these outcomes.***



[2]Larry Fortun of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, at the University of Florida, in his *Family Nutrition: The Truth about Family Meals*, reviews findings that tell us regular family meals are related to: **better adjustment in children and youth; earning better grades, more motivation and getting along better with others at school.**

On the other hand, those who do not eat regular family meals together are more likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use other drugs. Children and youth who do not eat family meals together are also more likely to report feeling depressed or having trouble at school. He also reports the negative impact watching television or using technology (cell phones) has on the positive family dining experience.

Nancy Gibbs, in *Time Magazine's The Magic of the Family Meal*, and Jeanie Lerche Davis of WebMD, **summarize**

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the recent findings concerning the benefits of family dinners:

- Everyone eats healthier meals.
- Kids are less likely to become overweight or obese.
- Kids more likely to stay away from cigarettes.
- They're less likely to drink alcohol.
- They won't likely try marijuana.
- They're less likely to use illicit drugs.
- Friends won't likely abuse prescription drugs.
- School grades will be better.
- You and your kids will talk more.
- You'll be more likely to hear about a serious problem.
- Kids will feel like you're proud of them.
- There will be less stress and tension at home.

Not bad, eh? From a Personal Safety Nets perspective, it's easy to understand. **We all share a human set of three needs: TO BE SEEN FOR WHO WE ARE, TO HAVE WHAT WE'RE SAYING REALLY HEARD, AND TO MATTER TO SOMEONE ELSE.** Where better to learn that than at the family table (with all due acknowledgement that each family is unique, and not all table experiences promote meeting these important connections).

There's much more to read on family dining and the overwhelming positive effects and benefits of sharing a meal as a family - work conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University ([CASA](#)) [3], the [FamilyResiliencyCenter](#) [4], and [TheFamilyDinnerProject.org](#) [5].

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[3] <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2012>

[4] <http://familyresiliency.illinois.edu/research/families-eating-and-talking-together>

[5] <https://thefamilydinnerproject.org>