Selected References: Family Meals
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Professional Journal Articles, Reports, and Book Chapters:


This paper describes formative research guiding the development of an intervention designed to improve the ability of mothers of young children to plan, prepare, and serve healthy family meals. Interviews showed that the mothers needed and wanted help in using pre-prepared ingredients to save time; kitchen organization and food storage; and healthy meal preparation and grocery shopping.

Abundant Assets Alliance: Developmental Assets: Essential Building Blocks of Human Development. Available at: [http://www.abundantassets.org/dev_assets.cfm](http://www.abundantassets.org/dev_assets.cfm)

A framework of developmental assets, developed by the Search Institute, identifies 40 critical factors for young people’s growth and development. Five age-specific lists, describe the 20 external and 20 internal assets for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, elementary-age children, and teenagers.


Survey of 560 female college students found that bulimic behaviors are inversely associated with the frequency of family dinner. These associations remained statistically significant after controlling for other familial factors.


This commentary summarized the role of nutrition-related factors on prevention of childhood obesity. Based on the current findings, recommended dietary goals were outlined, including: “Regular family meals should be encouraged.”


The goal of this research was to determine factors contributing to unhealthy weight. 615 parent-child pairs were surveyed in 2003 and 754 pairs in 2010. Many positive improvements were seen from 2003 to 2010, including an increase in the frequency of meals eaten at home daily from 52% to 73% of families.

Paper describes a cross-sectional analysis of a nationally representative sample of 8500 four-year-old children who were in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort. Children who were exposed to three household routines: regularly eating the evening meal as a family, getting enough nighttime sleep, and having limited screen time on weekdays, had a 40% lower prevalence of obesity than those exposed to none of these routines.


Analysis of Project EAT-II data showed that vegetables served at dinner significantly predicted adolescent intake of vegetables for males, females, high school and young adults at 5 year follow-up. Serving milk predicted later dairy intake and parental intakes significantly predicted young adult intakes for fruit, vegetables, and dairy.


Dietary intake was associated with a variety of family influences. The strongest correlates were availability of fast food in the home and parents purchasing food advertised on TV. Family support for healthful eating and eating meals together were also correlated with more healthful diets.

Bauer KW, Neumark-Sztainer D, Fulkerson JA, Story M. **Adolescent Girls’ Weight-Related Family Environments, Minnesota.** *Preventing Chronic Disease.* 2011;8(3) [http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2011/may/10_0025.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2011/may/10_0025.htm).

The study sample for this research was racially and ethnically diverse, with a wide range of parental education. One quarter of the girls were foreign born. Results suggest that parents of Asian girls, parents who have more education, and parents who recently immigrated to the US are more able to provide family environments promoting physical activity and healthy diets.


Examines the important role mealtime conversations play in the acquisition of vocabulary, which is predictive of later literacy and reading achievement.


Cross-sectional surveys of adolescents and their parents compared the influence of food availability and where foods were eaten on intakes of fruits, vegetables, and fat. Family meals positively influenced fruit intake. Eating while watching TV and fast-food and restaurant use was common and was associated with higher
fat intake. Home availability of healthy foods was less important than accessibility, such as making fruits and vegetables ready and inviting to eat.

This research group from the University of Toronto wanted to determine to what degree watching TV during meals affected food intake and found that there was an average increase of 228 kcals in the group who watched TV during meals. When given a glucose preload the boys compensated by eating less only in the group that was not watching TV. The authors conclude that television viewing delays normal mealtime satiation and reduces satiety signals from previously consumed foods.

Alcoholic families have fewer family rituals and routines, and practice them less deliberately, than non-alcoholic families. If alcoholic families make a deliberate effort to maintain family routines this has been shown to have a protective effect on adolescents in these families from becoming alcoholics themselves.

This review article discusses contributions of both genetics and the environment and discusses how children acquire food preferences. The discussion of parental style includes the emotional climate of the meal. The role of culture is discussed, including meals and television viewing habits. This paper includes interesting information on taste preferences.

Guidelines for healthy eating include: Create a positive environment for meals, eat family meals together, take time to relax, enjoy the food, and feel satiety.

Using data from Project EAT, the authors found that cross-sectional results for girls showed a positive association between authoritative parenting and more frequent family meals. For boys, maternal authoritative parenting was associated with more frequent family meals. Longitudinal results showed that authoritative parents predicted more frequent family meals 5 years later.

This article examines the factors that influence food preferences, food intake, and energy regulation in children. Social context for eating is important due to the eating behaviors of others in the environment, including peers, siblings, and parents. Parental feeding practices and control over children’s eating affect eating behaviors, including preferences, intake and self-regulation.

Discusses research on the effects of environmental factors and behavioral mediators on childhood overweight. The authors argue that guidance for parents should include how children develop food habits in the context of the family.

Birch LL. **Are Social Meals More Nutritious?** *Journal of Gastronomy.* 1993;7(1).

This issue focuses on “Taste, Health and the Social Meal” and includes essays, such as one by Leann L. Birch, that reference research looking at how eating is influenced by the social setting. There are also discussions of anthropological evidence supporting the need for people to share meals with family and friends.


This study used a subset of 714 mother-adolescent pairs from the students who participated in Project EAT. Mothers were interviewed about their concern with eating healthfully and adolescents were asked about their perceptions of their mothers’ concern about eating healthfully. These were compared with maternal and adolescent food intake and the home food environment. The authors concluded that the mother’s concern for healthful eating is associated with maternal eating behavior and the home food environment, but were not as strong a predictor of adolescent behaviors as adolescent perceptions of maternal attitudes.


This study suggests that adult eating behaviors are related to a number of mealtime environmental influences. Television viewing during meals and arguments during meals were associated with less healthy intakes. Planning meals in advance was associated with healthier intakes.


Describes study examining the level of agreement between adult and adolescent perceptions of the family mealtime environment and adolescent mealtime behavior.


Each additional hour of TV viewing was found to decrease fruit and vegetable intake by .14 servings (P=.025), adjusting for anthropometric, demographic, and dietary variables, and physical activity. The authors suggest that consumption of foods advertised on television may replace fruits and vegetables in teen’s diets.
This study of 112 pairs of parents with their 9-13 year-old children, indicated an important influence of parental role modeling and observational learning in forming eating attitudes and behaviors, including snack food intake, motivators to eat, and body dissatisfaction. Parental control of food intake resulted in increased intake and parental control over behavior using food resulted in greater body dissatisfaction but no difference in intake.

Students were surveyed in middle school and then again in high school to assess the association between regular family meals and dietary intake and eating habits. More regular family meals is associated with fewer fast food meals and improved diets with a higher intake of vegetables, calcium, fiber, iron, and vitamins A and B6 as well as other nutrients.

This paper describes a pilot test of a 5-step, self-directed, intervention program designed to help mothers of young children plan, prepare, and serve healthy meals. Results showed significant improvements in their kitchen organization, food storage area, and mealtime planning.

Australian study in which parents were surveyed regarding family meal structure, meal preparation, food availability, and media exposure during meals. A total of seven questions measured aspects of family meal structure. Parents of young children considered family meals pleasant and a time to connect and talk.

Author recommends that dietetics professionals encourage making family meals a priority and suggests ways they can help families implement strategies to make the most of family meals.

This article defines routines and describes the theories of why they are considered beneficial to children and their families. This study examines the importance of routines within this particular high-risk population on a child’s temperament, mother’s depression, cognitive and social outcomes, and child behaviors. The mothers’ ratings of child temperament, personal depression, and behavioral problems were all favorably influenced by higher levels of routine. Teachers’ ratings of child outcomes were improved by routines for girls but not different for boys.

Family meals resembling today's 'ideal' originated in the Victorian middle-class, including an informal breakfast, a lighter lunch and a more formal and substantial dinner in the evening. Working class families historically had less structured mealtimes, with the exception of Sunday dinners and holiday meals. Immigrant families used the main family meal of the week to hold onto cultural foodways and traditions. Working women, activities outside the home, and eating out became more prevalent in the 1920's, and was the start of a longing for family mealtimes as the time for families to be a family. Traditional family mealtimes returned in force during the 1950's for middle-class families, but in working-class families remained only a practice on Sundays and special occasions. The image of proper family mealtimes has remained a symbol of family unity and stability. However, the practice of the 'idealized' family meal has been the exception rather than the rule for most American families during most of our history.


This study found low intake of fruits and vegetables to be common, with one third of the preschoolers not even eating them on a daily basis. Greater fruit intake was associated with maternal education and being Caucasian. Greater vegetable intake was associated with mother's education, being older, and being female. Parental consumption was the strongest predictor of both fruit and vegetable intake in children. Child food neophobia had a strong negative impact.


The dietary patterns of children from families that watch television during mealtimes may be lower in fruits and vegetables and higher in pizzas, snack foods, and sodas.


This article examines the reliability and validity of a questionnaire assessing parental socio-environmental constructs, including parental style, food-socialization encouraging and discouraging practices, meal planning and shopping practices, food preparation practices, barriers to eating fruits, juices, and vegetables, parent self-efficacy to provide/encourage healthy diets, and fruit, juice, vegetable availability and accessibility.


Data from Project EAT-I and II were used to identify four dietary patterns at the two time intervals (vegetable, fruit, starchy food, and snack food at time 1 and vegetable and fruit, fast food, starchy food, and snack food at time 2). Results
showed a positive association between family meal frequency and the vegetable and fruit and the starchy food patterns and inversely associated with the fast food pattern.


Rituals are generally considered celebrations, traditions, religious observances, and symbolic events. Routines are more regular, generally daily, activities that serve to define roles and responsibilities, organize daily life, and reflect family characteristics. Assessing a family’s routines allows practitioners to differentiate between current practices and desired outcomes. Instruments for assessing family routines are described and referenced.


“A life course perspective focuses on how the life history of groups or individuals in society may explain differences in health… and, can be used to understand how people construct their food and eating choices and how changes in food and eating environment affect those choices.” The temporal framework includes trajectories, transitions, and turning points. The social framework includes social contexts – social class, race or ethnicity, and gender. The historical framework includes changes and trends in social, economic, and health policy.


Sisters in Health is a nutrition education program for low-income women to increase fruit and vegetable consumption. Factors found to contribute positively to increased consumption were positive social support in the groups and more positive attitudes about preparing fruits and vegetables. Changes in knowledge were not seen and were not associated with improved intakes.


Mealtime is viewed as a context in which to obtain naturalistic information about routine family functioning without self-report bias. It is a good way to observe how families negotiate competing agendas. Family functioning assessed during routine mealtime is associated with early childhood social-emotional and behavioral competence.


806 high school students provided survey data regarding family meal frequency, substance use, and general family connectedness. Substance use was compared to family meal and TV during meals. There was a significant difference for girls, but not boys, in substance use between those who had frequent family meals and those who did not. Whether the TV was on during did not alter the association.
This study discusses the protective influence of family meal frequency on significantly lower odds of cigarette smoking, alcohol use and marijuana use.

Findings from school-based survey of 4746 adolescents in Minneapolis area suggest eating family meals enhances the health and well-being of adolescents.

Reports 10-year treatment outcomes of obese children in 4 randomized studies. 34% of the variance in change in percentage overweight was predicted from sex, baseline percentage overweight, self-monitoring weight, meals eaten at home, and family and friends’ support for eating and exercise.

Uses cross-sectional survey data from students enrolled in Project EAT study. Approximately one-third of students reported watching television during meals. Authors concluded that watching television during family meals was associated with poorer dietary quality among adolescents, including lower intakes of vegetables, dark green/yellow vegetables, calcium-rich food, and grains and higher intakes of soft drinks compared to adolescents not watching TV at meals.

This chapter “illustrates family mealtimes as multilayered activities that serve to regulate behavior and hold deep symbolic meaning for participants.” Mealtimes are a place and time to study family interaction patterns and family identity. Optimal family functioning related to mealtime conversation, task accomplishment, affect management, and interpersonal involvement are each described. Family identity is considered the integration of the ritual elements of communication, commitment, and continuity. Clear and direct communication, emotional support and genuine commitment, and a realistic continuity in routine all lend to child well-being and a positive family identity.

This is a qualitative review of 32 research articles published between 1950 and 2000. Routines and rituals change throughout the family life cycle, becoming more regular and meaningful as children grow older and actively participate. Routines and rituals are closely tied to culture. Family routines are an indication of family organization and are important to family members’ health and well-
being. Routines may be protective of risks associated with single-parent families. This paper addresses issues of study design, theory, application and policy.


Parents/guardians of children enrolled in WIC in New York State were surveyed regarding frequency of eating dinner together, television on during dinner, and frequencies of serving fruits, vegetables and milk. Eating together was positively associated with serving fruits and vegetables. Having the TV on during meals was negatively associated with serving fruits and vegetables. Neither eating together or watching TV was significantly associated with serving milk.


Focus groups intended to identify parents’ perceptions of the barriers to family meals showed that parents enjoy sharing/bonding at meals, but say they have limited time for meal preparation and are frequently multi-tasking at mealtime. Other concerns included a desire for children to help with cooking but didn’t want the mess and frustration with their children’s limited food likes.


Data for this study was taken from four waves of data collection from Project Northern Chicago, a group randomized trial for the prevention of alcohol use in youth. 5812 students from 61 schools participated between the beginning of 6th grade and the end of 8th grade. Over time both family dinner frequency and teen perceptions of parent-child communication decreased. In spite of this, family meal frequency was positively associated with teen perceptions of parent-child communication scores over time (p<.0001).


The HOME program, consisting of five, 90-minute sessions for children and Parents was studied for its ability to build meal preparation skills and the quality of foods served for family meals. Outcomes post intervention were positive, but not all changes were maintained at 6 months follow-up.


This study using surveys of a racially-diverse group of high school students found that frequency of family meals was positively associated with eating breakfast and fruit intake and negatively associated with depressive symptoms. Teens who did not eat family dinners were more likely to be overweight and food insecure.
This purpose of this study was to examine parental perceptions of the mealtime environment and identify strategies to improve the dietary quality of meals. Parental concerns about picky eating led to 40% of families experienced some conflicts over food. Parents requested help with meal planning, food preparation, and clean-up, more time for meals, assistance with picky eating, new recipes and meal ideas, and decreased conflict during meals.

This study examines the family mealtime environment from the perspectives of both adolescents and parents using survey and interview data from 902 parent-child pairs. Both parents and children perceived family meals positively. However, parents and younger teens were more likely to say family meals were an important priority than older teens. Scheduling difficulties increased with age and mealtime rules were expected more in younger teens. Parents were less likely than children to report television viewing during family meals.

This study uses data from 8000 children in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort. SES, gender, race, and behavioral and environmental factors all influence risk of persistent overweight. For each additional hour of television a child watched, their odds of being overweight increased 3%. For each family meal per week that they did not experience, the odds of overweight increased by 9%.

Participants in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort, were assessed at four points between kindergarten entry and third grade to identify eating and activity factors associated with onset and persistence of overweight. “Children who watched more television and ate fewer family meals were more likely to be overweight for the first time at spring semester third grade.” These two factors, along with neighborhood safety, were predictive of persistent overweight.

Reports on a study of 65 parent-child pairs using parent-completed surveys and child BMI. Results suggest that efforts to curb childhood obesity should address improving parent knowledge of child nutrition and reducing child television viewing.

Study documents family media habits in six areas. Findings suggest that families that practice positive media habits in one area tend to practice positive habits in other areas. The survey asked how often a TV is on during meals. Responses were 18% always, 22% often, 26% sometimes, 18% rarely, and 16% never.


American Heart Association Scientific Statement. Provides guidelines for “Improving Nutrition in Young Children” including “Have regular family meals to promote social interaction and role model food-related behavior.”


This article gives an overview of the theoretical basis of the framework and describes interrelationships among the components. The Food Decision-Making Framework (FDF) considers behavior change within the context of families and communities.


The authors describe (and illustrate) the family food decision-making framework and state that it “provides a basis for discerning and describing different food decision-making styles, assessing a particular family’s food decision-making processes, identifying opportunities and constraints in family micro and macroenvironments, and establishing goals for change. It guides families, practitioners, and researchers in identifying effective points of intervention and assessing priority research questions.”


This paper discusses family and community food decision-making and defines a variety of terms, including “family.”


Most of the families with young children in this study ate the evening meal together. Mothers showed a more positive attitude toward the importance of nutrition than fathers. Family interaction scores were highest when mothers were employed part-time and when parental education was higher. Income did not make a difference.
Results of national survey of 16,000 youth participating in the “Growing Up Today Study.” Identified relationships between frequency of family dinners with higher intakes of nutrients and decreased intake of fried foods and soft drinks.

This research, using questionnaires to assess risk and protective factors, found that a higher frequency of family meals was inversely related to bingeing, purging, and overweight.

This paper discusses meta-analysis of 17 studies that examined overweight, food consumption and eating patterns, and disordered eating. Frequent family meals increased the odds of eating healthy foods and decreased the odds of eating unhealthy foods, likelihood of overweight, and disordered eating.

This study surveyed 902 adolescents and their parents. Household food availability and parental dietary intake were associated with adolescent intake.

This article describes a fruit and vegetable promotion program that consisted of Family Fun Nites, which were at-home family meal sharing and game evenings.

The PMAS was developed to identify dimensions of mealtime behaviors used by parents. This paper examines the scale’s ability to explain variance in children’s diet and weight status. Mothers exhibited more “gentle” PMAS actions whereas fathers exhibited more “forceful” PMAS actions.

Henry BW. **The Importance of the Where as Well as What and How Much in Food Patterns of Adolescents.** *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2006;106(3):373-375.
This brief application article encourages nutrition professionals to provide teens with information about how and why to make healthful food choices and take into account barriers to healthy eating.

Reports a negative impact of parental evening work on the home environment for children, aged 5-10, from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.


This study examined 6 key feeding constructs: offering new foods many times, offering a variety of vegetables, having the child seated while eating, permitting the child to decide how much to eat, establishing regular mealtimes, and not using food as a reward. Discussion questions are listed as well as positive and negative responses. Results suggest parents perceived many barriers, gave in readily to children and displayed inappropriate feeding practices.


The purposes of this study were to predict the MAR (Mean Nutritional Adequacy) score from intakes of fruits, vegetables, and dairy foods in low-income mothers and their toddlers and determine whether having a child seated while eating was predictive of the child’s nutritional adequacy. Results showed that children who remained seated while eating at all meals had better diet quality.


This brief application article provides practical advice in how to counsel parents in limiting their child’s screen time and promoting family meals. Suggested questions to ask that will help identify motivators and barriers are included.


This paper discusses the concept of time scarcity, the most commonly cited barrier to family meals; and examines how mothers’ constructions of time relate to time for the tasks associated with food provisioning for their families. In-depth interviews with working mothers identified three “timestyles”: Active, reactive, and spontaneous. The three time management strategies employed were planning, coordination, and prioritization.


This article describes an educational intervention for WIC families designed to promote family meals. Program development, key messages, components, pilot-testing, implementation, and evaluation are all described. The program was studied in randomly selected agencies, with other agencies serving as controls, implementing a similar program promoting physical activity. Intervention was shown to result in a statistically significant increase in family meals.

Focus groups and interviews of working mothers examined family food choices. Factors influencing food choices most were nutrition, time, catering to family desires, budget and management/organization. Describes mother’s role as nutritionist, economist, manager/organizer, meaning-creator and family diplomat.


These findings are taken from Project EAT-II, using the sample of 20 ½ year olds and comparing taking the time to eat with “eating on the run.” The concept of “time scarcity” was related to planning, preparing and time spent eating meals. Social eating was associated with more nutritious meals and eating on the run with more soft drinks, fast food, fat and less healthy food.

Larson NI, Neumark-Stzainer D, Hannan PJ, Story M. **Family Meals during Adolescence Are Associated with Higher Diet Quality and Healthful Meal Patterns during Young Adulthood.** *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2007;107:1502-1510.

Students enrolled in Project EAT completed surveys and food frequency questionnaires in high school classes and mailed a second set 5 years later. Findings indicated that family meal frequency during adolescence predicted higher intakes of fruit, vegetables, and key nutrients and lower intakes of soft drinks in young adulthood. Family meal frequency was also related to more breakfast meals in females, more dinner meals in both sexes, and a higher priority for meal structure and social eating.


This study measured the change in fruit and vegetable intake of over 2500 teen boys and girls involved in Project EAT, between early, middle, and late adolescence. During the transition from early to middle adolescence, the average total daily fruit and vegetable intake decreased by 0.7 servings for girls and 0.8 servings for boys. Between middle and late adolescence, the decrease was 0.6 servings for both genders.


This cross-sectional study compared involvement in food preparation and shopping among youth involved in Project EAT with diet quality. Helping with dinner preparation was reported by most teens (68.6%), and nearly half reported shopping for food (49.8%). Several characteristics were associated with a higher reporting of these activities including having more frequent family meals. Being involved in food preparation was associated with improved diet quality. Shopping for food did not make the same positive difference. The authors recommend interventions for teens to teach cooking skills and strategies for making healthful consumer decisions.

This article reviews the history of American family mealtime, including statistics on prevalence from several large national surveys (page 5), showing that most families across demographic groups have meals together 4 or more times per week. Daily family meals were highest in Hispanic and Asian-American families and lowest in African-American families. Current mealtime practices include an increase in take out and eating out, and that most families have the television on during meals, with less emphasis on mealtime etiquette. The impact of mealtime on cultural socialization, literacy and academic outcomes, risk behavior and socioemotional development, and nutrition are all reviewed.


Results of this study indicate that the family dining environment and food-related parenting practice were most important to preschooler's food acceptance. The dining environment included the presence of parents and siblings, and dining condition and atmosphere.


Using focus groups this research examined Latina mothers’ perceptions of factors that act as barriers for establishing healthy eating and physical activity habits in their preschool-age children. Among the results lack of time and lack of family meals are mentioned in addition to watching television during meals.


This study examined whether parents accurately reported their preschoolers’ intake of fruits and vegetables on a food frequency questionnaire compared with an observed meal. Results indicated that parents are accurate in their ability to recall their child’s fruit and vegetable intake.


This is the second report based on data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) which provides a portrait of the well-being of children and their daily activities. About three-fourths of children under age 6 had dinner each day with their designated parent. Sixty-five percent of children aged 6-17 had dinner every day with at least one parent.


Describes how across cultures shared family meals cultivate human connections. “Shared meals with children are a fundamental arena for disseminating cultural and emotional connections between and among the generations of a family.”

Children of women who felt that the family eating together was not important had increased odds of being overweight at age 14. This was a stronger determinant than reported frequency of meals eaten together. “Family meals” were not defined and therefore the actual or perceived quality of meal experiences may be related to the mother’s attitude of the importance of family meals.


Findings show that characteristics such as income, employment, gender, and family structure impact food preparation decisions. Women and married adults spend more time preparing food than men and single adults. Higher incomes and more time spent working relates to less time spent cooking. Larger family size increases the time spent in food preparation. The study compared the average time spent cooking with the expected time needed to follow the Thrifty Food Plan, finding that the 40 minutes spent cooking by most single parents or two-working parents in low-income households is only half of the 80 minutes needed to follow the TFP recipes.


This study using data from 210 8-10 year old African-American girls found that 26.9-35% of the girls' daily caloric intake was consumed while watching television, and 40-50% of all evening meals were eaten while watching TV.


Data was collected from a sample of ethnically-diverse third grade students and a sample of predominantly Latino fifth grade students using 3 nonconsecutive 24 hour dietary recalls. Children recorded whether they were watching television at the time of food consumption. On weekdays 17-18% of total energy was consumed while watching television. This increased to 26% on weekends. Fewer fruits and vegetables were consumed while watching television.

Mayfield B. **Family Meals Promote Wellness.** *ADA Digest.* Fall 2008;4-5.

This article summarizes the benefits of family meals and strategies for public health nutritionists to promote family meals.


This study compared 28 families with an overweight child with 28 families with a normal weight child using both observations and self-reports of parental control and support at mealtime. Parents of overweight children self-reported higher degrees of control and equal amounts of support. Observations at mealtime found that in families with an overweight child maladaptive control strategies were twice as prevalent and the social-affective eating environment was less supportive.

This study followed 59 infants for 13 years, logging parental report of when parents fed, changed, played with and comforted their infants at 1 month of age and then periodically over the next 13 years asked about the child’s development. The authors concluded that greater regularity of daily activities, including a reliable interval between meals, may increase predictability of infant demands, enhanced parental perception of need cues, increased parental confidence and stronger care-taking routines, leading to improved parent-infant relationships and infant regulatory capacity, which was shown to help the child be less anxious about new situations and environments when they are older.


Discusses how maintenance of family routines (including regular family meals) is positively linked to multiple child outcomes, including academic achievement, self-esteem, and both behavioral and psychosocial adjustment. Everyday activities predict better child outcomes than random, irregular activities, even those that may be more stimulating. Families that are organized and have predictable routines produce children with more positive outcomes.


Describes strategies for meeting social-emotional goals during snack time in child care settings.


This organization has been studying the impact of family meals for over 15 years and has surveyed thousands of teens in order to publish a report each year of the results. They find consistently that teens who eat with their parents 5 or more times a week have higher grades, lower rates of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use, and have stronger family ties.


This paper provides an overview of more than a decade of research on family meals as part of Project EAT, a large, population-based study of adolescents. Main findings indicate that many adolescents and parents view family meals in a positive light in spite of the diversity of context and frequency of family meals. Benefits of more frequent family meals include improved dietary intake, reduction of disordered eating and substance abuse, and better psychosocial health.

This article provides five evidence-based recommendations for health care providers to help prevent obesity and eating disorders among adolescents. These are: 1) discourage unhealthy dieting; 2) promote a positive body image; 3) encourage more frequent, and more enjoyable family meals; 4) encourage families to talk less about weight and do more at home to facilitate healthy eating and physical activity; and 5) assume that overweight teens have experienced weight mistreatment and address this issue with teens and their families.


Family meal frequency at time 1 was associated with time 2 disordered eating behaviors, including extreme weight control behaviors, less extreme unhealthy weight control behaviors, binge eating, and chronic dieting. For adolescent girls but not boys, more regular family meals were associated with lower prevalence of time 2 extreme weight control behaviors, even after adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics, BMI, family connectedness, parental encouragement to diet, and extreme weight control behaviors at time 1.


This article reviews the indicators that adolescents are at risk for poor dietary intake and unhealthy weight control behaviors. The authors describe family meals in homes with teenagers, showing significant diversity in frequency and family meal patterns. Family meals have been associated with improved diet quality in several large-scale studies, including Project EAT, the Growing Up Today Study, and the Add Health Study. Research also indicates a protective impact of family meals on preventing disorder eating behaviors.


The authors conclude that in general, adolescents who reported more frequent family meals, high priority for family meals, a positive atmosphere at meals, and a more structured mealtime environment were less likely to engage in disordered eating. The associations were stronger for girls than for boys.


Family meals were found to play an important role in promoting positive dietary intake among adolescents. Improved intakes of fruits, vegetables, grains, calcium-rich foods and lower intakes of soft drinks were associated with more frequent family meals.

Findings from this pilot study indicate the need for further research on the associations between family meal patterns and eating behaviors.


Describes results of focus groups with adolescents to increase understanding of family meal patterns and perceptions of adolescents regarding the family meal. Barriers to family meals included schedules, teen desire for autonomy, family conflicts, and dislike for food at meals. Teens believed they would eat better if they ate more frequent family meals.


“Universally, commensality (the practice of sharing food and eating together in a social group such as a family) is central to defining and sustaining the family as a social unit. In ancient Greece, for example, oikos (family) was stipulated as “those who feed together.” Cultures, communities, and families differ in whether family members eat together and what is eaten according to generation, gender, and social rank. This article discusses language socialization in the context of mealtime conversation and “cultural apprenticeship” (learning through active observation and direct participation) of mealtime behaviors.


This paper describes Norwegian study involving 1000 schoolchildren between the ages of 13 and 18. The researchers analyzed the antecedents of the influence of teens in family meal decisions, specifically for fish as a main meal. Their participation in family decisions were affected by their motivation, family communication patterns, social norms, and parental preferences.


This book chapter examines the value of dinner-table conversation as a context for observing child language and parent-child interaction. It is based on the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development in which children from low-income families were studied in the home and school environment.


This study examined whether caregiver feeding styles were associated with children’s food consumption patterns in African-American and Hispanic families. Results favor authoritative feeding, in which the child is encouraged to eat healthy foods, but is also given some choices about eating options. This feeding style was associated with an increased intake of dairy, fruits, and vegetables.

Reviews research which focuses on family and social influences on children’s eating patterns, including whether families eat together.


Family meals were one of the factors assessed in this cross-sectional survey of preschool and school-age children. 93% of preschool children regularly ate dinner with a parent, versus only 80.7% of school-age children.

Rhee K. **Childhood Overweight and the Relationship between Parent Behaviors, Parenting Style and Family Functioning.** *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.* 2008;615:12-37.

This paper examines the influence of parents on the development of eating habits and weight in children. Parental feeding practices discussed include prompting to eat, use of rewards, restricting access to food, and control over child intake. General parent behaviors discussed include exposure to and availability of foods, portion size, and modeling. Parental influences such as parenting style and family functioning (which is where family meals are discussed as a proxy for family functioning) are also discussed as well as interaction of the various factors.


This report describes the amount and types of media used by young people. The average time spent with media is 6½ hours per day, with about 3 hours as TV, almost 2 hours spent listening to music, and about 1 hour each on the computer and playing video games. This compares to less than an hour doing homework.


This study used a nationally representative survey and 8 focus groups. It was found that 83% of children age 6 months to 6 years use some type of screen media daily for an average of just under 2 hours. Nearly a third of these children live in a household where the TV is on all or most of the time. 43% of children age 4-6 have a TV in their bedroom. 53% of all children eat a snack or meal in front of the TV on any given day.


73 child-parent pairs participated in an evaluation of the Ready. Set. ACTION! (RSA) program, a theater-based pilot study for obesity prevention. Findings indicate that parents and children view the home food environment similarly, with child perceptions more strongly associated with child fruit and vegetable intake.

This paper discusses factors related to childhood obesity and includes the role of the family meals, encouraging regular family meals and the reasons for their benefits. They report a Canadian study finding that children who ate supper with their families at least 3 times a week are at decreased risk for being overweight or obese.


This research editorial discusses trends in eating together, showing a decrease over time that appears to be more recently improving. This article also discusses the relationship of family dinner with healthful diets and obesity. Possible confounding variables such as SES, television viewing, and carry out food eaten at home.


The impact of family meal frequency on reducing the incidence of obesity was seen in non-Hispanic white children and non-Hispanic black boys. In Hispanic boys in low-education households increased frequency of family meals was related to a slight increase in the incidence of obesity.


Focus groups revealed that families with children with diabetes experienced the same barriers to family meals as other families, namely busy schedules. Strategies to improve family meals included shopping for foods needed, planning, cooking in advance, and simplified cooking techniques.


Satter argues that “consumers decode the Dietary Guidelines and MyPyramid as “don’t eat so much; don’t eat the foods you like.” This in turn creates weight preoccupation and anxiety about eating, harming our eating attitudes and behaviors. She proposes that we must “trust ourselves to eat as much as we are hungry for, to eat the foods that we like, and to feel comfortable to do it all over again.” She states that restrained eating is so common it is perceived as normal. Regarding family meals, Satter states that “parents feed themselves and their children best and most reliably when they provide meals that they find richly rewarding to plan, shop for, prepare, provide, and eat.”


Describes the feeding relationship between parent and child from infancy to adolescence. Satter proposes that the feeding relationship is characteristic of the overall parent-child relationship. A positive feeding relationship supports
good nutrition, food acceptance, developmental eating skills, self-regulation of intake, and socialization.


This study explored the associations between overweight and frequency of family meals and how those associations differ with race and ethnicity. Results showed that for whites an increase in family meals frequency reduced the odds for being overweight, or becoming overweight. This was not found for blacks or Hispanics. The author suggests that this may be due to differences in the types and portions of food served at family meals.


WIC staff were surveyed about their weight status, comfort level addressing childhood overweight topics, and recommendations for educational materials and programs. Results showed that weight status and job title were significant factors in feeling comfortable with discussing weight-related issues with WIC participants. Staff with the least training and those who were more overweight were the least comfortable. Staff development and wellness programs were recommended to improve self-efficacy and a more supportive environment.


Describes meal and snack patterns of the 3,022 infants and toddlers in the Feeding Infants and Toddlers Study (FITS).


Currently, three-quarters of American adults eat the evening meal at home, but only 58% prepare meals at home. Americans take meals home from restaurants more often than eat them at the restaurant. In 2005, the frequency of meals eaten at home averaged 4.9 times per week.


Describes the Home-School Study, which observed conversations at playtime and story time and recorded conversations at meal time, then measured later school achievement. Mealtimes offered the greatest opportunities for extended discourse, involving both explanatory and narrative talk. Children are exposed to more sophisticated vocabulary and learn more rare words at mealtime resulting in greater language acquisition and later academic success.


This book chapter focuses on data collected during the preschool period for the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development. Home data included tape recordings of mothers and children reading books, telling stories, playing with toys and of family mealtimes.
Spear BA. The Need for Family Meals. J Am Diet Assoc. 2006;106(2):218-219. This article encourages health providers who work with adolescents to assess family meal patterns and teen involvement in purchasing and preparing meals; and then provide education to adolescents to help their families with meal preparation and food purchasing.

Stitt S. An international perspective on food and cooking skills in education. British Food Journal. 1996;98(10):27-34. This article aims to strengthen the argument for prioritizing food cookery skills in schools as one of the most effective health promotion strategies.

Stockmyer C. Remember when mom wanted you home for dinner? Nutrition Reviews. 2001;59(2):57-60. Most (89%) family cooks believe that eating together as a family is important. Average time to prepare a meal is 28 minutes. Television is frequently on during meals, but families claim to still be able to maintain conversations.

Stables G. The Changing US Family, and Importance of Healthy, Convenient Family Meals for Children and Youth. ADA Digest. Fall 2008:1-3. This article discusses the changing American family demographics leading to less frequent family meals, including shifting roles, dual income families, less food preparation skills, and less time for planning, preparing and eating meals together.


Sweeting H, West P. Dietary habits and children’s family lives. Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics. 2005;18(2):93-97. A British school-based survey of 2,146 parents to study the associations between dietary habits at age 11 and family life, which included family structure, meals, and maternal employment status, accounting for socioeconomic factors. Family structure and meals were not found to be associated with children’s diets.


456 African-American parents participated in the High-Five, Low Fat Nutrition Program, developed through Parents as Teachers, a national program that focuses on parents as role models. The Parental Dietary Modeling Scale used has 6 items, including “I sit with my child at mealtime.” Modeling of healthful dietary behaviors is a good way for parents to influence their child’s intake.


Data collected at baseline from 3245 ethnically diverse adolescents enrolled in the Pacific Obesity Prevention Communities study, measured frequency of family meals, other aspects of the home food environment, and BMI. Findings indicate that families who have regular family meals have more healthful foods available in the home, support their child eating healthfully, limit television, eat breakfast, eat five fruits and vegetables a day, and pack a lunch from home. Family meals were modestly associated with BMI in bivariate analysis but when demographic characteristics were included in the model, the association was not significant.


Editorial compares the nutrient density of meals eaten away from home with home prepared meals. “A growing consensus suggests that eating at home at the family table is a simple, albeit counter-cultural solution.”


Provides national estimates of the frequency and determinants of adolescents’ consumption of fruits, vegetables, and dairy foods. Parental presence at the evening meal was associated with a lower risk of poor consumption of fruits, vegetables, and dairy foods as well as the likelihood of skipping breakfast.


One of several references about the Harvard Home-School Study of language development in the preschool years.


A cross-sectional survey of 152 adults and 75 adolescents in 90 households showed that family meal frequency was associated with fruit and vegetable intake in adults and intake of sweets and sweetened beverages in teens. It was also positively correlated with perceived family cohesion. Family cohesion was not found to consistently mediate the relationship between frequency of family meals and individual dietary intake.

This study among 61 low-income men and women from rural Appalachian Pennsylvania found that food preparers perceived more costs than rewards in serving vegetables, especially those that are cruciferous, deep orange, and dark green leafy. They served primarily only those vegetables that were acceptable to everyone in the family and ignored unfamiliar vegetables.


Report summarizes potential benefits from adopting targeted behaviors to prevent or treat childhood obesity. Increasing the number of meals eaten with family members, especially parents was seen as having both obesity benefits and non-obesity benefits.


This study from the UK, examined the impact of family meals on substance abuse in teens, looking at not only family meal frequency but also family connectedness, perceived priority, atmosphere and structure of mealtime as predictors of alcohol and tobacco use. They found that the teens’ perception of meals was a more important predictor of substance abuse than frequency.


The Commission on Children at Risk concluded “the human person is hardwired to connect to other people” and “the intact, two-parent family and religion play a central role in promoting the social and psychological welfare of children.” This paper also describes the work of Emile Durkheim over a century ago with suicide rates and how they are related to an adolescent’s tie to “an authoritative community” including an intact family.


This cross-sectional survey of over 2400 school children in Belgium-Flanders and the Netherlands looked at factors associated with fruit and vegetable consumption. This study found the strongest correlates for both fruit and vegetable intake were taste preferences and parental influence, including both parental modeling and parental demand to eat fruits and vegetables. Other important factors included parental facilitation and home availability.


This review article summarizes the literature on family influence on dietary intake, especially during the teen years and looked at summarizes family meal patterns and reviews the known influences of family meals on dietary intake. Figures illustrating the complex interaction of factors are included.

This study examined college women’s recollections of family mealtimes to determine whether these memories differed between normal weight, overweight, and underweight women. Mealtime communication-based stress was associated with bulimia/food preoccupation and oral control. Underweight women in this study had the highest levels of mealtime stress, but were not anorectic. The strongest correlate with a young woman’s body self-esteem was emphasis on mother’s weight. Parental discussions at mealtimes emphasizing weight-with-appearance-with-worth had a negative impact on daughters and was associated with eating disorders and overweight.


This article reports the use of social marketing strategies to develop a nutrition education program for Head Start children. Focus groups determined the campaign concept, followed by piloting the message of trying new foods. A food frequency questionnaire was used to select the novel foods introduced to the children. The program included games and activities, trying new foods at snack time and parent newsletters. Children in the experimental classrooms showed an increase in overall acceptance of new foods.


This research examined factors associated with the prevention of obesity and the development of healthy lifestyle habits in elementary and junior high age children. Eating meals as a family every day was associated with a lower rate of obesity. Other positive lifestyle factors included getting enough sleep and eating balanced meals.


This cross-sectional study used questionnaires to determine the correlates of adolescent dietary behavior by assessing a set of psychosocial influences. Their findings suggest that for dietary-change interventions to be effective they will require multiple components, including the need for parents to be encouraged to provide healthful food environments.


Peter Zollo cites research conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited, in which a national survey of adolescents asked teens what they like to do with their parents. They found that 79% listed “eat dinner at home” as a favorite activity.
Lay/Professional Books:

Canfield J, Hansen M, Wentworth D. *Chicken Soup for the Soul Cookbook*  
“The kitchen is the heart of the home. So much of life is lived around the family table . . .” This book combines heartwarming stories of mealtime memories accompanied by recipes.

Civitello L. *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*  
This book presents how throughout history, food has played a critical and defining part in individual cultures and the overall development of civilization. Civitello connects major historical events and describes how and why these events affected and defined the culinary traditions of different societies.

Christopher D. *Come to the Table: A Celebration of Family Life*. Warner Books, Inc., 1999. Written by the founder of Pampered Chef, this book describes how to honor the tradition of the family table.

This book takes a global look at the social, symbolic, and political-economic roles of what, and how, we eat. Contributing authors reveal how food habits and beliefs both present a microcosm of any culture and also contribute to our understanding of human behavior.

This book is intended to be a practical guide offering effective methods for opening channels of communication between family members, such as regularly sharing meals, vacation, storytime, etc. The chapter on family meals compares the family meal habits of several families and then outlines the elements of “intentional” family meals.

Kerr G. *The Gathering Place*  
“The Galloping Gourmet” celebrates the family dining table as “our last remaining tribal gathering place.” This cookbook takes the reader to 13 ports of call and shares the foods and mealtime traditions of each stop.

Meiselman HL. *Dimensions of the Meal*  
This book examines the science, culture, business, and art of eating. Sections cover definitions of meals, the biological bases of the meal, the meal and culture, the meal and cuisine, and designing and producing meals.

Miller W, Sparks G. *Refrigerator Rights: Creating Connections and Restoring Relationships*  
The Berklely Publishing Group, 2002.  
This book sites research on the negative impact of social isolation and the importance of connecting with others through meaningful relationships.
   This book helps parents and concerned adults respond to the “fat talk” of teens, counteract negative media messages, and provide the truth about nutrition and calories, dieting, and eating out.

Ornish D. Love and Survival: 8 Pathways to Intimacy and Health
   Evidence for the importance of intimate relationships on health. Extensively referenced.

Putnam R. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community
   Harvard social scientist describes data showing how Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors and our democratic structures and how we may reconnect.

Rappoport L. How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food.
   This book traces our culinary customs from the Stone Age to the stove-top range and explores the fascinating and often contradictory myths and rituals shaping our eating habits.

   These classic books on feeding children, by an expert in nutrition and eating behaviors, spell out the roles of parents and children at mealtime.

Smith A. Back to the Table: The Reunion of Food and Family Hyperion, 2001.
   A unique cookbook by Oprah Winfrey’s personal chef, written to strengthen family bonds.

Stracher C. Dinner with Dad: How I Found My Way Back to the Family Table.
   A New York attorney embarks on a year long experiment to be home with his family in suburban Connecticut for dinner 5 days a week, even helping cook a couple of times a week. The book describes his successes and failures with wit and insight into what matters most about family meals.

   This book contains stories and studies showing how eating together makes families smarter, stronger, healthier, and happier.