

# The Magic of the Family Meal

By **NANCY GIBBS** Sunday, Jun. 04, 2006



The statistics are clear: Kids who dine with the folks are healthier, happier and better students, which is why a dying tradition is coming back

MICHAEL ELINS FOR TIME

Close your eyes and picture Family Dinner. June Cleaver is in an apron and pearls, Ward in a sweater and tie. The napkins are linen, the children are scrubbed, steam rises from the green-bean casserole, and even the dog listens intently to what is being said. This is where the tribe comes to transmit wisdom, embed expectations, confess, conspire, forgive, repair. The idealized version is as close to a regular worship service, with its litanies and lessons and blessings, as a family gets outside a sanctuary.

That ideal runs so strong and so deep in our culture and psyche that when experts talk about the value of family dinners, they may leave aside the clutter of contradictions. Just because we eat together does not mean we eat right: Domino's alone delivers a million pizzas on an average day. Just because we are sitting together doesn't mean we have anything to say: children bicker and fidget and daydream; parents stew over the remains of the day. Often the richest conversations, the moments of genuine intimacy, take place somewhere else, in the car, say, on the way back from soccer at dusk, when the low light and lack of eye contact allow secrets to surface.

Yet for all that, there is something about a shared meal--not some holiday blowout, not once in a while but regularly, reliably--that anchors a family even on nights when the

food is fast and the talk cheap and everyone has someplace else they'd rather be. And on those evenings when the mood is right and the family lingers, caught up in an idea or an argument explored in a shared safe place where no one is stupid or shy or ashamed, you get a glimpse of the power of this habit and why social scientists say such communion acts as a kind of vaccine, protecting kids from all manner of harm.

In fact, it's the experts in adolescent development who wax most emphatic about the value of family meals, for it's in the teenage years that this daily investment pays some of its biggest dividends. Studies show that the more often families eat together, the less likely kids are to smoke, drink, do drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders and consider suicide, and the more likely they are to do well in school, delay having sex, eat their vegetables, learn big words and know which fork to use. "If it were just about food, we would squirt it into their mouths with a tube," says Robin Fox, an anthropologist who teaches at Rutgers University in New Jersey, about the mysterious way that family dinner engraves our souls. "A meal is about civilizing children. It's about teaching them to be a member of their culture."

The most probing study of family eating patterns was published last year by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University and reflects nearly a decade's worth of data gathering. The researchers found essentially that family dinner gets better with practice; the less often a family eats together, the worse the experience is likely to be, the less healthy the food and the more meager the talk. Among those who eat together three or fewer times a week, 45% say the TV is on during meals (as opposed to 37% of all households), and nearly one-third say there isn't much conversation. Such kids are also more than twice as likely as those who have frequent family meals to say there is a great deal of tension among family members, and they are much less likely to think their parents are proud of them.

The older that kids are, the more they may need this protected time together, but the less likely they are to get it. Although a majority of 12-year-olds in the CASA study said they had dinner with a parent seven nights a week, only a quarter of 17-year-olds did. Researchers have found all kinds of intriguing educational and ethnic patterns. The families with the least educated parents, for example, eat together the most; parents with less than a high school education share more meals with their kids than do parents with high school diplomas or college degrees. That may end up acting as a generational

corrective; kids who eat most often with their parents are 40% more likely to say they get mainly A's and B's in school than kids who have two or fewer family dinners a week. Foreign-born kids are much more likely to eat with their parents. When researchers looked at ethnic and racial breakdowns, they found that more than half of Hispanic teens ate with a parent at least six times a week, in contrast to 40% of black teens and 39% of whites.

Back in the really olden days, dinner was seldom a ceremonial event for U.S. families. Only the very wealthy had a separate dining room. For most, meals were informal, a kind of rolling refueling; often only the men sat down. Not until the mid--19th century did the day acquire its middle-class rhythms and rituals; a proper dining room became a Victorian aspiration. When children were 8 or 9, they were allowed to join the adults at the table for instruction in proper etiquette. By the turn of the century, restaurants had appeared to cater to clerical workers, and in time, eating out became a recreational sport. Family dinner in the Norman Rockwell mode had taken hold by the 1950s: Mom cooked, Dad carved, son cleared, daughter did the dishes.

All kinds of social and economic and technological factors then conspired to shred that tidy picture to the point that the frequency of family dining fell about a third over the next 30 years. With both parents working and the kids shuttling between sports practices or attached to their screens at home, finding a time for everyone to sit around the same table, eating the same food and listening to one another, became a quaint kind of luxury. Meanwhile, the message embedded in the microwave was that time spent standing in front of a stove was time wasted.

But something precious was lost, anthropologist Fox argues, when cooking came to be cast as drudgery and meals as discretionary. "Making food is a sacred event," he says. "It's so absolutely central--far more central than sex. You can keep a population going by having sex once a year, but you have to eat three times a day." Food comes so easily to us now, he says, that we have lost a sense of its significance. When we had to grow the corn and fight off predators, meals included a serving of gratitude. "It's like the American Indians. When they killed a deer, they said a prayer over it," says Fox. "That is civilization. It is an act of politeness over food. Fast food has killed this. We have reduced eating to sitting alone and shoveling it in. There is no ceremony in it."

Or at least there wasn't for many families until researchers in the 1980s began looking at the data and doing all kinds of regression analyses that showed how a shared pot roast could contribute to kids' success and health. What the studies could not prove was what is cause and what is effect. Researchers speculate that maybe kids who eat a lot of family meals have less unsupervised time and thus less chance to get into trouble. Families who make meals a priority also tend to spend more time on reading for pleasure and homework. A whole basket of values and habits, of which a common mealtime is only one, may work together to ground kids. But it's a bellwether, and baby boomers who won't listen to their instincts will often listen to the experts: the 2005 CASA study found that the number of adolescents eating with their family most nights has increased 23% since 1998.

That rise may also reflect a deliberate public-education campaign, including public-service announcements on TV Land and Nick at Nite that are designed to convince families that it's worth some inconvenience or compromise to make meals together a priority. The enemies here are laziness and leniency: "We're talking about a contemporary style of parenting, particularly in the middle class, that is overindulgent of children," argues William Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis and author of *The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties*. "It treats them as customers who need to be pleased." By that, he means the willingness of parents to let dinner be an individual improvisation--no routine, no rules, leave the television on, everyone eats what they want, teenagers take a plate to their room so they can keep IMing their friends.

The food-court mentality--Johnny eats a burrito, Dad has a burger, and Mom picks pasta--comes at a cost. Little humans often resist new tastes; they need some nudging away from the salt and fat and toward the fruits and fiber. A study in the *Archives of Family Medicine* found that more family meals tends to mean less soda and fried food and far more fruits and vegetables.

Beyond promoting balance and variety in kids' diets, meals together send the message that citizenship in a family entails certain standards beyond individual whims. This is where a family builds its identity and culture. Legends are passed down, jokes rendered, eventually the wider world examined through the lens of a family's values. In addition,

younger kids pick up vocabulary and a sense of how conversation is structured. They hear how a problem is solved, learn to listen to other people's concerns and respect their tastes. "A meal is about sharing," says Doherty. "I see this trend where parents are preparing different meals for each kid, and it takes away from that. The sharing is the compromise. Not everyone gets their ideal menu every night."

Doherty heard from a YMCA camp counselor about the number of kids who arrive with a list of foods they won't eat and who require basic instruction from counselors on how to share a meal. "They have to teach them how to pass food around and serve each other. The kids have to learn how to eat what's there. And they have to learn how to remain seated until everyone else is done." The University of Kansas and Michigan State offer students coaching on how to handle a business lunch, including what to do about food they don't like ("Eat it anyway") and how to pass the salt and pepper ("They're married. They never take separate vacations").

When parents say their older kids are too busy or resistant to come to the table the way they did when they were 7, the dinner evangelists produce evidence to the contrary. The CASA study found that a majority of teens who ate three or fewer meals a week with their families wished they did so more often. Parents sometimes seem a little too eager to be rejected by their teenage sons and daughters, suggests Miriam Weinstein, a freelance journalist who wrote *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*. "We've sold ourselves on the idea that teenagers are obviously sick of their families, that they're bonded to their peer group," she says. "We've taken it to an extreme. We've taken it to mean that a teenager has no need for his family. And that's just not true." She scolds parents who blame their kids for undermining mealtime when the adults are co-conspirators. "It's become a badge of honor to say, 'I have no time. I am so busy,'" she says. "But we make a lot of choices, and we have a lot more discretion than we give ourselves credit for," she says. Parents may be undervaluing themselves when they conclude that sending kids off to every conceivable extracurricular activity is a better use of time than an hour spent around a table, just talking to Mom and Dad.

The family-meal crusaders offer lots of advice to parents seeking to recenter their household on the dinner table. Groups like Ready, Set, Relax!, based in Ridgewood, N.J., have dispensed hundreds of kits to towns from Kentucky to California, coaching

communities on how to fight overscheduling and carve out family downtime. More schools are offering basic cooking instruction. It turns out that when kids help prepare a meal, they are much more likely to eat it, and it's a useful skill that seems to build self-esteem. Research on family meals does not explore whether it makes a difference if dinner is with two parents or one or even whether the meal needs to be dinner. For families whose schedules make evenings together a challenge, breakfast or lunch may have the same value. So pull up some chairs. Lose the TV. Let the phone go unanswered. And see where the moment takes you.