



Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Family Dinners

December 2007

“A table + a meal + a conversation = a recipe for strong family relationships and healthy youth.” Volumes have been written and spoken about how to keep youth out of trouble; could the answer be as simple as eating meals together as a family more often?

One of the most extensive studies of family eating patterns published in 2006 by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) shows that it could be during the teen years that this daily investment may pay some of its biggest dividends.

How often does your family eat an evening meal together? Fifty percent of Southwest Wisconsin teens report eating three or more evening meals per week with their families based on results from the 2005 Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS) of 3,727 7th to 12th graders. Fifty-one percent of males report eating three or more evening meals with their families, as compared to 49% of females.

Figure 1 shows that there are also grade differences in who eats three or more evening meals with their families. Fifty-seven percent of 7th-9th graders report this, while only 43% of 10th-12th graders do. In fact, 23% of 10th-12th graders report eating no evening meals with their family.

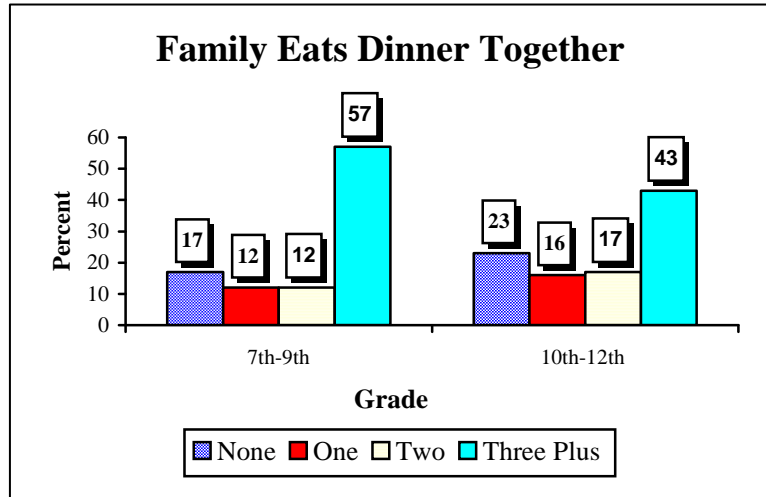


Figure 1: Percentage of student responses to the question, “How many nights a week does your entire family sit down to dinner together?”

IMPACTS OF FAMILY MEAL TIME

Figure 2 highlights some of the positive impacts of eating three or more meals together as a family--

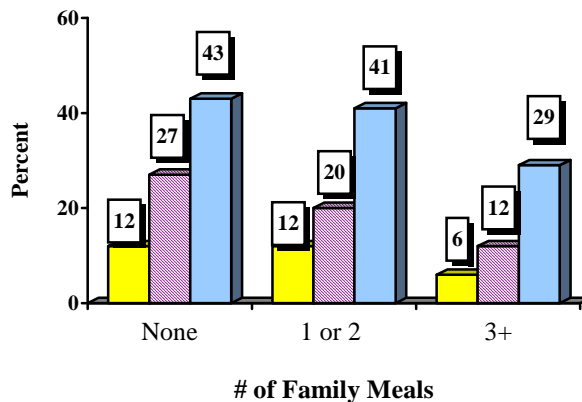


Figure 2: Percentage of students who sit down to eat 3 or more meals a week with their entire family, compared to drinking alcohol, smoking a whole cigarette and using Marijuana in the past 30 days.

Experts in adolescent development stress the value of family meals. 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 teaching at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "A meal is about civilizing children. It's about teaching them to be a member of their culture."

CASA reports that of the youth who report eating fewer than three meals a week with their family, 45% say the T.V. is on during meals (as opposed to 37% of all households), and nearly a third say there isn't much conversation. These youth are also twice as likely as those who have frequent family meals to say there is a great deal of tension among family members, and are much less likely to think their parents are proud of them.

MAKING FAMILY MEALS PRIORITY

Life is busy. Parents are working; youth have activities in and out of school. For many it is a constant on-the-go lifestyle. What can be done to make a commitment to dining together with our families since this single activity has the real possibility of enhancing so many aspects of the lives of our youth? Consider the following ideas:

From the parent's point of view:

- Make it a priority to meet together. (At home, in a restaurant, or a picnic before a game)
- Be a role model for healthy eating. Set a good example by limiting choices such as soft drinks, fast food, sweets, etc.
- Minimize distractions. Eat at a table with the television off. Turn off the phones.
- Keep it simple. Cold sandwiches with a salad and a glass of milk and fruit for dessert can be just as nutritious as a five-course meal. Use of leftovers saves time as well as money.
- Don't force healthy eating. The parent's job is to decide what food is offered; the youth's job is to choose what and how much to eat. Avoid turning meals time into a battle.
- Talk about what happened in everyone's day: school, work, extracurricular activities, and current events.
- Keep conversation positive and make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

From the youth's point of view:

- Let youth help with meal planning, food purchases and preparation.
- Give small children jobs like setting out napkins and silverware.
- Older youth may enjoy filling glasses with milk or water.
- Involve teens with the cooking.
- Allow teens to invite a friend for dinner.
- Give your youth a chance to express their thoughts and opinions ~ not just on the meal but with all topics.

REMEMBER: PARENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

"Parents Make a Difference" is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This newsletter is adapted from the UW-Extension "Whose Kids?...Our Kids!" Teens and Family Dinners newsletter, originally written by Deb Ivey. This issue of "Parents Make a Difference" was written by Bev Doll, UW-Extension Grant County and edited by Amy Mitchell, UW-Extension Crawford County, Jessie Potterton, UW-Extension Lafayette County, Pam Hobson, UW-Extension Richland County, and Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant County. Thanks are extended to the 3,727 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2005 SWYS survey. Contact UW-Extension www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/SWYS2005.html for further information: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Richland County (608) 647-6148 and Crawford County (608) 326-0224.

