

# The Family Dinner Deconstructed

by ALIX SPIEGEL

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The ritual of a family dinner has been praised as an antidote to bad grades and bad habits in kids. But as researchers look closer at the family dinner, they raise the question: Is it the mere act of eating together that counts, or is it that strong families are already more likely to have a family dinner?

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RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Renee Montagne.

Today in Your Health: the family dinner. About a decade ago, research started appearing on the family dinner, and the news was uniformly good. According to the scientists, children who ate with their families were less likely to drink, smoke, do drugs, struggle with asthma, get depressed and have eating disorders.

Today, NPR's Alix Spiegel reconsiders the reputed power of dinner and explores what the research really tells us.

ALIX SPIEGEL: In the last six or seven years, a number of public figures have thrown caution to the winds and taken up the cause of the family dinner. The comedian George Lopez and the actress Jamie Lee Curtis have both recorded public service announcements. Then recently, another public figure lent a familiar name to the cause.

Unidentified Woman: Hi, Mr. President. My parents believe that eating meals together will make our country strong. Is this something that you did when you were a kid?

President GEORGE W. BUSH: I did eat with my family, so long as my mother wasn't cooking.

Ms. BARBARA BUSH (Former First Lady): Not good making fun of your mother, even if you are president. But it is good to have dinner with your kids.

SPIEGEL: In this public service announcement, Barbara Bush goes on to explain that children who eat with their parents are less likely to end up with a drug, cigarette or alcohol habit. Now, research has shown that children who eat with their parents are less likely to struggle with substance abuse.

The question at issue is only this: Is it that dinner itself offers some magical protection, or is there something else at work?

David Dickinson, a professor of education at Vanderbilt University, says this is an open question.

Professor DAVID DICKINSON (Education, Vanderbilt University): It's possible that some of these findings are occurring because the ability to organize a mealtime and come together may be just one indicator of a family that's reasonably intact and functional.

SPIEGEL: Now, Dickinson's done his own research on dinner. A number of years ago, he and some researchers from Harvard wanted to figure out why some kids learned to read early while others lagged behind. To do this, they decided to look at family routines. The researchers recorded mealtimes, but they also looked at other things: how often parents read to their children, played with their children. And according to Dickinson, the group came to the study with some very firm expectations.

Prof. DICKINSON: We naturally expected that the data on book reading would be most powerful, because so much research has focused on book reading.

SPIEGEL: But, says Dickinson, the headline the study produced was very different.

Prof. DICKINSON: What we found was that our data on the quality of conversations in mealtimes was a much stronger predictor of how later development would go for children's language and literacy development.

SPIEGEL: So the moral seemed to be: Eat dinner, read early. But as Dickinson will tell you, a deeper look at the study might suggest a slightly different conclusion. Turned out the content of dinner was important. That is, the kids who did well didn't just eat dinner with families. They ate dinner with families that maintained complex conversation, rich with explanation, storytelling and more.

Prof. DICKINSON: When a new word was used - like, suppose reptile - and the parent who would stop and say, oh, you know, like a snake, or say something that would give the child a little definition for what that word meant, those kinds of interactions were really powerful.

SPIEGEL: Dinner provided an opportunity for children to be exposed to these language behaviors on a regular basis. But dinner in a limited verbal environment apparently didn't have the same benefits.

And this kind of thing is true in a variety of the studies on dinner. For example, Barbara Fiese of Syracuse University studies how family interactions effect asthma in children. She does this by looking at family routines, rituals around filling prescriptions, weekend activities, religious observance. And like Dickinson, she found that one of these routines stood out.

Professor BARBARA FIESE (Syracuse University): We keep coming back to dinner time. It does have some powerful effects, both for physical and mental health.

SPIEGEL: Specifically, Fiese found that asthmatic children who ate dinner with their families were less likely to end up in emergency rooms. But again, it turns out that those families had to engage in some very specific behaviors at dinner.

Prof. FIESE: The three factors that we find that predict the physical and the mental health outcomes are how the meal is accomplished - that is, are roles assigned? Something as simple as, you know, setting the table and knowing that there's a beginning and an end to the meal.

The second thing is a genuine concern about each other's daily activities.

SPIEGEL: Finally, asthmatic children had to be shown a certain kind of empathy in order to benefit. Now that's a fairly extensive set of behaviors, which raises this question: Can a dysfunctional family sit down to dinner and benefit?

Prof. FIESE: If the meal is conducted in a way to support healthy development.

SPIEGEL: So in other words, what you're saying is the only way that a dysfunctional family can get the benefits from sitting down to dinner is by being a functional family?

Prof. FIESE: That they can be prepared to deal with some of the things that happen at the table. That's true.

SPIEGEL: But not everyone sees it this way.

Dr. DIANNE NEUMARK-SZTAINER (Professor, University of Minnesota): Even in families where family relationships are difficult, family meals can still be found to predict better outcomes.

SPIEGEL: This is Dr. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, a professor at the University of Minnesota who studies the relationship between dinner and eating disorders. For her most recent study, Neumark-Sztainer gave an extensive questionnaire to kids in school.

Dr. NEUMARK-SZTAINER: We asked the adolescents questions such as: How much do you feel like you can talk to your mother or your father about problems? How much do you feel like your mother and father care about you?

SPIEGEL: And Neumark-Sztainer says that even kids who didn't much trust their parents were less likely to develop an eating disorder when they sat down to dinner with them. But she admits that a questionnaire study like the one she conducted can't offer a definitive view of the role of dinner.

Dr. NEUMARK-SZTAINER: We need to do an experimental intervention where you have similar families, you randomize them into regular family meal groups and non-regular family meal groups, and you see what the outcome is.

SPIEGEL: That's precisely the kind of study that has never been done, because it's a difficult study to arrange. And so in the meantime, researchers are left to speculate on the independent value of dinner.

David Dickinson of Vanderbilt is skeptical that it is the meal alone.

Prof. DICKINSON: I think it's very unlikely that it's simply having dinner. So if one could mandate that everybody sits down and eats dinner together, that -I don't think that's necessarily going to have the sort of beneficial effects that people observe.

SPIEGEL: So perhaps all the good news on dinner is premature. At this point it's difficult to say, but as Dickinson points out, there's one solid certainty about dinner. It is one of the few times in modern life when families can sit down together, speak face to face, build relationships, monitor behavior - all things, he says, that simply can't hurt.

Alix Spiegel, NPR News, Washington.

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