

THE TIME BETWEEN SERVING DINNER & CLEARING THE DISHES.



Family Dinner: Does It Matter?

The art of staying in touch with teenagers
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For some years now, we've been told that teenagers who sit down to family dinner every day are more likely to do well in school and less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol or get into trouble with the law.

It's a piece of conventional parenting wisdom that has been honored, guiltily, in the breach in many households with two working parents and children with intense schedules of activities.

It's been backed up by dozens of studies reinforcing the importance of regular sit-down dinners in keeping kids firmly in the parental orbit. There are whole books and web sites devoted to promoting closeness and sharing family values over home-cooked meals, rather than scarfing prepared food on the fly.

But a recent study purports to show that those *de rigueur* dinners may have been overrated.

A pair of researchers at Cornell and the University of Minnesota took a close look at data from interviews with some 18,000 adolescents, as well as their parents, over a period of several years, about their home lives and their well-being. Turns out that the long-touted importance of family dinners fades if you take into account other aspects of the families' home life: whether there were two parents in the home, whether parents and kids did things together like go to movies, whether parents helped kids with homework, whether there was parental monitoring in the form of rules and curfews.

As they write in the *New York Times*:

(www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/opinion/sunday/is-the-family-dinner-overrated.html?_r=1&hpw)

To give an example: without controlling for such factors, we found that 73 percent of adolescents who seldom ate with their families (twice per week) reported drug and alcohol use, compared with 55 percent of those who ate with their families regularly (seven days a week). But controlling for these factors, the gap was cut in half, from 18 percentage points to 9.

Furthermore, when the researchers compared data from interviews with the same kids a year later and then again when they were young adults, the effects just didn't persist.

So what's the verdict on family dinner? None of this changes the fact that it's a good way for parents to give kids undivided attention and tune into what they are doing and thinking. Regular meals together keep everyone in the habit of touching base and sharing information—even if not everyone is in the mood to do it. But it's not by any means the only time or place to do those things.

The *Times* piece also mentioned a recent survey that asked teenagers when, other than over dinner, they talked to their parents about their lives. The vast majority said in the car. I can't tell you the number of times that my wife or I have been surprised by hearing (or overhearing) something important from one of my kids while driving them somewhere. Talk in the car is informal and unplanned, which takes pressure off by lowering expectations, and, until smart phones became ubiquitous, it tended to be uninterrupted by intrusions from other parties.

The point is, it isn't the particular ritual of family dinner that has such an important influence on kids, but the habit of staying connected, and both talking to and listening to your kids on a daily basis. Even if you don't do family dinner, you should still expect your kids to talk to you. Expect to know about their lives, who their friends are, what they're happy about, and what's bothering them. Expect them to continue to do things with you: go to a movie, share a meal at a restaurant, take a hike, go shopping, play tennis-whatever you (and they) like to do. Those expectations will help keep kids in your orbit.

Teenagers are torn by their need for independence and their need for clear, close authority figures, even if they may not seem all that eager for the closeness, or the authority. Dinner may be overrated, but attention isn't: Parents who rarely slow down enough to actually listen, or are chronically distracted when they're at home, send a message to kids that they're not a high priority. So, whether it's breaking bread together or watching a TV show together (another increasingly rare shared pastime), find a regular activity that's a good way for your family to get the conversation started, and keep it going.

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