

Does dinner make a strong family, or does a strong family make dinner?

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The family meal is often touted and encouraged for its social and health benefits, but a new Cornell University study questions the nature of this association, finding that the perceived benefits may not be as strong or as lasting once a number of factors are controlled for.

"We find that most of the association between [family](#) meals and teen well-being is due to other aspects of the family environment. Analyses that follow children over time lend even weaker evidence for causal effects of [family meals](#) on adolescent and young adult well-being," said Kelly Musick, associate professor of policy analysis and management at Cornell and lead author of "Assessing Causality and Persistence in Associations Between Family Dinners and Adolescent Well-Being," to be published in the June edition of the [Journal of Marriage and Family](#).

Musick and co-author Ann Meier, associate professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, found that the ability to manage a regular family dinner is in part facilitated by family resources such as time and money, and in part a proxy for other family characteristics, including time together, closeness, and communication. Families with both [biological parents](#) present, a non-employed mother, higher income, and better [family relationships](#) ate together more frequently. Controlling for the quality of family relationships in particular explained much of the family dinner's association with teen [depressive symptoms](#), [substance use](#), and [delinquency](#) – three factors typically examined in family meal studies. Only some of these associations held up to analyses of adolescent outcomes over time.

The study accounts for aspects of the [family environment](#) that differentiate families on the basis of how often they eat together, and it's the first to use a fixed-effects approach that focuses on how changes in family dinners relate to changes in adolescent outcomes. Estimates are based on a sample of about 18,000 children from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health.

"Meals may afford a regular and positive context for parents to connect with children emotionally, to monitor their social and academic activities, and to convey values and expectations. This is what we suspect is driving any causal relationship between family dinners and child well being. But, family dinners also appear to be part and parcel of a broader package of practices, routines, and rituals that reflect parenting beliefs and priorities, and it's unclear how well family dinners would work unbundled from the rest of that package," said Musick.

The authors add that future work needs to go further in assessing which elements of mealtime may be most salient, looking beyond how often families eat together to examine whether talking, television, texting, eating the same food, or helping in the kitchen mediate or moderate the potential benefits of mealtime.

Provided by Cornell University

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