

Studies show socio-economic status dictates family dining equity

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Eating together as a family is commonly thought of as being healthy for family members and is a ritual many try to live up to. However, research into understanding family meals more thoroughly shows that different

aspects of mealtimes—eating and feeding on the one hand and the atmosphere on the other—affect the social and economic aspects of family dining habits.

A pair of published [research papers](#) by Dr. Fairley Le Moal—who conducted her work at the College of Nursing and Health Sciences at Flinders University and is currently an Associate Researcher in Sociology at the Center Max Weber in France—examines why family meals are such complex events to manage.

The first of her studies investigated children's mealtime food socialization—how [parents](#) get children to eat together and how children integrate this—in socially diverse households in France and Australia, ranging from lower middle-class to upper-class positions, with children mostly between the ages of five to eight.

While all parents in the study strived to serve [healthy food](#), the results showed that food socialization and parents' understanding of children's taste development were linked to the household's social class position and the resources it has available.

The research, "Exploring unequal class logics of mealtime food socialization. An ethnography of family meals in France and Australia," by Fairley Le Moal, Maxime Michaud and John Coveney, is published in the April 2024 edition of [Appetite](#).

The more resources the parents had, the more they were able to perform an intensive food socialization style, which led them to prepare balanced menus and get children to eat the food served.

The fewer resources the parents had, the more they engaged in a hands-off food socialization style, leading them to serve more child-oriented and less diverse menus.

This led to other behavioral traits being affected. An intensive food socialization style was connected to the development of different social skills in children, such as negotiation skills, whereas with the hands-off style, children learned to be quite autonomous in their eating.

The prospect of a happy family dining together is also an attractive scene that many hope to achieve.

"The happy family meal ideology is widespread, but few studies have specifically investigated the way emotions are managed at the table," says Dr. Le Moal.

Dr. Le Moal also examined the way emotions are managed when dining together at table in the research paper, "Mealtime emotion work: Gendered politics of care and power at the table," by Fairley Le Moal, published in the [*Journal of Marriage and Family*](#).

The results show that emotions—both an individual's and others' emotions—are managed differently during mealtimes between mothers and fathers. The mothers of this study were seen as caring, loving, and patient, whereas the fathers were seen as fun, but also impatient and authoritative.

The parents also did not deal with the many conflicts and tensions that arose during mealtimes in the same way: mothers were observed as producing much more "emotion work"—which means managing a family's emotions and making sure the right atmosphere is met—to resolve conflicts and calm [children](#). These efforts were significant and were key to reaching a pleasant and loving atmosphere, but they were highly invisible efforts.

"Emotion plays a significant role, so evaluating the amount and type of mealtime emotion management are essential to understand the barriers

and burdens that families face when wanting to eat together.

"Investigating the atmosphere of family mealtimes and highlighting the strategies [family members](#) adopt to deal with emotions and conflicts at the table is important, as it brings us to the center of understanding the work of feeding a family, and of family life.

"The notion of family remains a powerful institution, and [family meals](#) are still positioned symbolically as the center of family life—so the results of this study will be of interest to many parents and health care professionals."

More information: Fairley Le Moal, Mealtime emotion work: Gendered politics of care and power at the table, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12975](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12975)

Fairley Le Moal et al, Exploring unequal class logics of mealtime food socialisation. An ethnography of family meals in France and Australia, *Appetite* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2023.107195](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.107195)

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