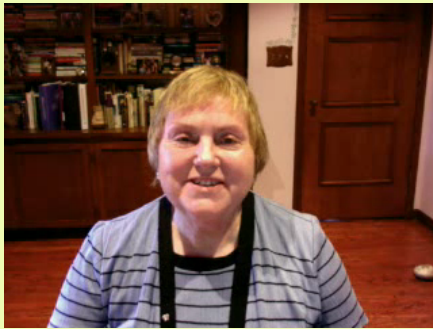


# PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PARENTS -

MAKING SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PRACTICAL FOR FAMILIES



## THE FAMILY MEAL "VACCINE"

Research demonstrates the many benefits of the family meal, especially in protecting adolescents from negative high risk behaviors. Unfortunately, families are less likely to enjoy meal times together today than in the past.

Barriers to family meals cited by parents include too little time, child and adult schedule challenges, and food preparation. Most parents say they place a very high value on family meals, ranking them above every other activity (including vacations, playing together and religious services) in helping them connect with their families and kids. Most wish they had more family dinners.

Family meals are powerful for many reasons. First, meal times impact all our senses – the sight, touch, taste, and smell of food as well as listening to family conversation. Family meals offer the opportunity to spend time together, reconnect after a busy day, communicate with and listen to each other, share values and ideas, as well as problem solve.

Family meals also contribute to traditions that tie families together. A special food for a birthday celebration, a favorite place to eat for special occasions, a cultural or ethnic food unique to the family's heritage – these become traditions that provide meaning and context to children as they grow.

Family meals provide a structure for the day, allowing children to feel more secure and safe, knowing what to expect.

Family meals also permit parental monitoring of children's moods, behavior, and activities, providing parents with insight into the emotional well being of their children.

Family meals, when extended to neighbors and friends, allow children to learn and appreciate social interactions, importance of community, and experience different ideas while under that guidance of their parents.

When evaluating the scientific research on the affect of the family meal, it is important to take into consideration the number of family members present, the frequency of the family meals, as well as the type of study (cross sectional versus longitudinal). Studies have found that benefits are increased with more family members present and when family meals occur 5 – 7 times a week. ( *Fiese B and Hammons A. "Is frequency of shared family meals related to the nutritional health of children and adolescents?" J of American Acad of Peds 2011; 127:1565-1574* )

Below we will list some of the many benefits of the family meal, and in an upcoming newsletter, we will provide ideas on how to implement this important practice in your family.



### ACADEMIC and LANGUAGE BENEFITS

Teens who have frequent family dinners are likelier to get better grades in school.

"Teens who have dinner with their families seven times a week are almost 40 percent likelier to say they receive mostly A's and B's in school compared to teens who have dinner with their families two or fewer times a week (62 percent vs. 45 percent)."

The importance of family dinners II. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University Web site.



### HEALTHY NUTRITION

Children ages 9-14 who have more regular dinners with their families have more healthful dietary patterns, including eating more fruits and vegetables, less saturated and trans fat, fewer fried foods and sodas, and more vitamins and other micronutrients



### DECREASED ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

Decreased marijuana use - Teens who have infrequent family dinners (fewer than 3 per week) are 2 ½ times more likely to use marijuana.

Decreased alcohol use - Teens who have infrequent family dinners are twice as likely to use alcohol

Decreased nicotine use



### IMPROVED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS and BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

Improved family relationships

Teens having frequent family dinners are more likely to report having excellent relationships with their family.

<http://casafamilyday.org/familyday/files/themes/familyday/pdf/Family-Dinners-II.pdf>. Published September 2005. Accessed February 10, 2014.

Language development is enhanced. Mealtimes offer unique opportunities for children to learn as they hear longer discussions that include explanations and narratives.

Children expand their vocabularies as they hear new words used in conversations.

There is a connection between children's language experiences during their preschool years and their future literacy skills in grade school and high school.

Children are 35% less likely to engage in disordered eating (weight control tactics: self-induced vomiting, laxative use, diet pills, fasting, eating very little food, using food substitutes, skipping meals).

Children are 24 % more likely to eat healthier foods.

Children are 12% less likely to obese just by eating family meals.

*Fiese B and Hammons A. "Is frequency of shared family meals related to the nutritional health of children and adolescents?" J of American Acad of Peds 2011; 127:1565-1574.*

Preschool-aged children exposed to the three household routines of (1) regularly eating the evening meal as a family, (2) obtaining adequate nighttime sleep, and (3) having limited screen-viewing time had a 40% lower prevalence of obesity than those exposed to none of these routines. These household routines may be promising targets for obesity-prevention efforts in early childhood.

*Anderson SE, Whitaker RC. Household routines and obesity in US preschool-aged children. Pediatrics. 2010; 125: 420-428.*

Adolescents from homes where the family regularly eats meals together (>5 meals/week) have a much lower likelihood of disordered eating and smoking.

Teens who eat with the family eat more vegetables, fruits and dairy products.

*Neumark-Sztainer D. Eating Among Teens: Do Family Mealtimes Make a Difference for Adolescents' Nutrition? New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development 2006; 111:91-104.*

*Neumark-Sztainer D, Wall M, et al. Are family meal patterns associated with disordered eating behaviors among adolescents? J Adolesc Health 2004; 35:350-*

Decreased access to prescription drugs - Teens who have infrequent family dinners are more likely to have access to prescription drugs in order to get high

*2011 Family Dinners Report Finds Teens who have Infrequent Family Dinners Likelier to Smoke, Drink, Use Marijuana accessed on February 7, 2014*  
<http://www.casacolumbia.org/newsroom/press-releases/2011-family-dinners>

Decreased likelihood that friends use drugs - Teens who have infrequent family meals (< 2 meals / week) are 3 times more likely to report that half or more of their friends use marijuana

Teens who have infrequent family meals are twice as likely to know a friend who uses Ecstasy.

Teens who have infrequent family meals are 80% more likely to know a friend who abuses prescription drugs.

*The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) September 2005 The Importance of Family Dinners II Accessed February 10, 2014*

They are 1 ½ times more likely to have an excellent relationship with their mother.

They are twice as likely to have an excellent relationship with father.

They are twice as likely to have an excellent relationship with sibling(s)

Teens surveyed state they like family mealtimes. 71% of teenagers in one survey said they consider talking/catching-up, and spending time with family members as the best part of family dinners

*The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) (2011, Sept.). The importance of family dinners VII. Accessed February 10, 2014*

### Better mental health

The more frequent the family meals, the better the emotional health of the adolescent, according to a study of over 26,000 Canadian teens between 11 and 15 years of age.

Teens with more frequent family meals had fewer emotional and behavioral problems

Teens were more trusting and had more helpful behaviors toward others

Teens had higher life satisfaction regardless of family economics

*Elgar, FJ, Craig W, Trites SJ. Family Dinners, Communication, and Mental Health in Canadian Adolescents. J Adolesc Health 2013; 52:433-438.*

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