



Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Family Mealtime

March 2014

Eating as a family is often overlooked as a critical part of youth development. Children and teens who eat together with their families are less likely to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, are more likely to get better grades in school, be less depressed, and volunteer more in their communities (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Stainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004)

BUSY SCHEDULES = NO TIME TO EAT TOGETHER

Many factors contribute to the reason families often do not eat together:

- Demanding schedules
- Lack of cooking skills
- Varying tastes
- Limited planning
- Electronic devices

WHY IS EATING TOGETHER IMPORTANT?

“Most American families are starved for time to spend together, and [mealtime] may be the only time of the day when we can reconnect, leaving behind our individual pursuits like playing video games, emailing and doing homework. [Mealtime] is a time to relax, recharge, laugh, tell stories and catch up on the day’s ups and downs, while developing a sense of who we are as a family,” according to Dr. Anne Fishel, author of *thefamilydinnerproject.org*. Eating together and cooking together also:

- Provides an opportunity to practice and improve communication skills.
- Offers the chance for a family to share, learn, and have fun together.
- Improves food choices and family habits, creating healthier lifestyles.

- Teaches children to cook while helping parents prepare and cook meals for their families.

ARE SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN TEENS EATING WITH THEIR FAMILIES?

The recent Department of Public Instruction Youth Risk Behavior Survey of 5,410 youth in grades 7th through 12th in Southwest Wisconsin revealed that 41% of 12th graders reported they ate with their families less than 4 times per week. Chart 1 also illustrates as teens get older, they are less likely to eat together with their families.

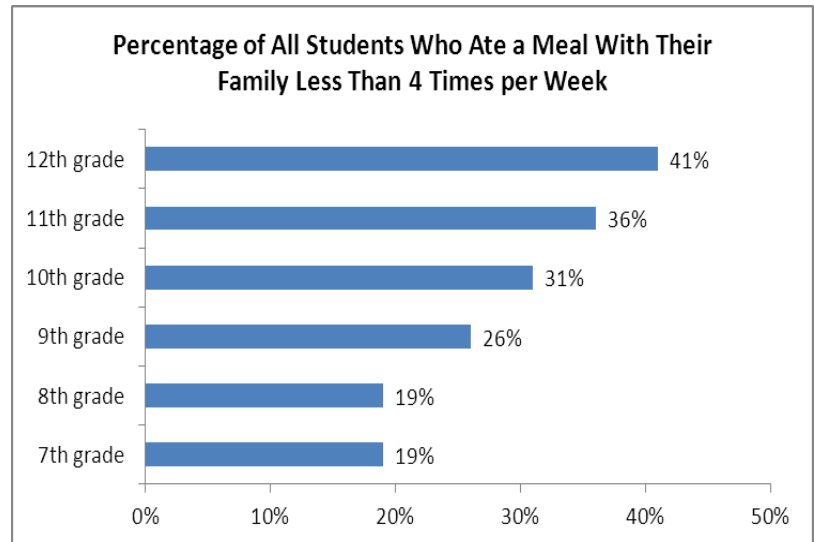


Chart 1: Responses to the question: *About how often do you eat meals with one or more of the adults in your home?*

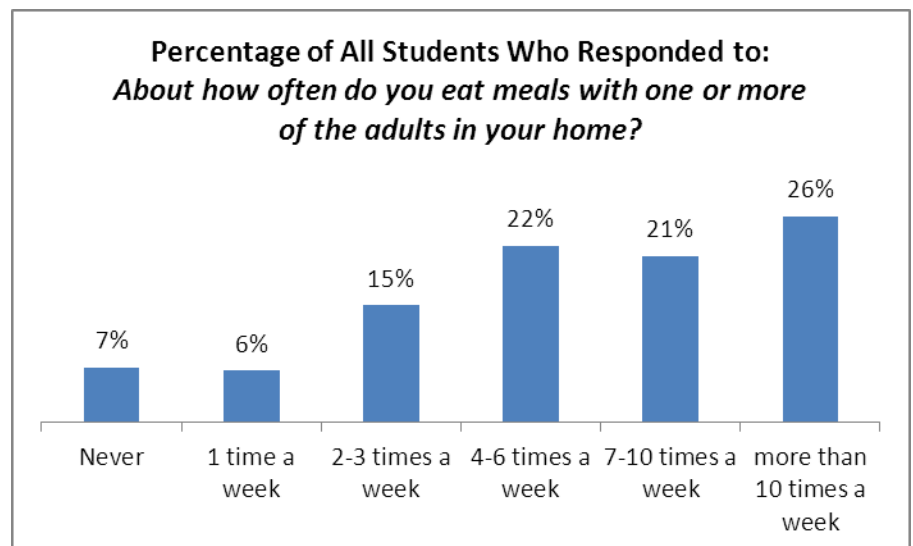


Chart 2: Teen responses to the question: *About how often do you eat meals with one or more of the adults in your home?*

(over)

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

Washington State University's Nutrition Education Program, "*Eat Together, Eat Better*" (2005), encourages families to:

a) *Cook Together*

Most teens enjoy helping in the kitchen! When you let them help plan, shop for, prepare, set the table, and clean up, teens begin to learn an everyday skill they will use the rest of their lives. By helping prepare food, teens learn basic cooking skills, are more likely to make healthier food choices, become more willing to try new foods, learn more about family traditions and culture, and even have fun together as a family.

- Share the tasks with everyone in your family.
- Be patient!
- Start with simple recipes.
- Have fun together!

b) *Talk Together*

"Communication is how we connect with each other. We share our thoughts, feelings and ideas. When we eat together, we also communicate" (Washington State University, 2005). Talking together at the kitchen table helps teens learn manners, practice their communication skills, express themselves, learn new vocabulary, and practice listening. "When we eat together, we also communicate about what we are eating, and that influences food choices and habits for our families." Washington State University suggests:

- Take turns talking. Only one person speaks at a time.
- Listen carefully.
- Be open to new ideas.
- Turn off the TV, phone, personal electronic devices, or other distractions.

How can you start conversation at

the dinner table? Here are some ideas:

- a) "If you could have anybody over for dinner, who would it be? What questions would you ask that person? What kind of food would you prepare?"
- b) "What's the craziest thing you've ever eaten?"
- c) "Did you see any cool pictures or hear anything interesting today?"
- d) Parents – tell a story about:
 - i. a negative experience you learned something positive from
 - ii. how children's names were chosen
 - iii. some jobs you had when you were younger
 - iv. your ancestry
 - v. people you idolized as a child

c) *Celebrate Together*

Food is an integral part of American celebrations. These celebrations can include anniversaries, holidays, special occasions, birthdays, or festivities. Celebrating brings people closer together as a family. Such celebrations can help pass on healthy habits and family traditions. Don't have a family tradition? Here are some ideas:

- Saturday morning pancakes (try *real* maple syrup)
- Sunday dinners (invite friends over)
- Monday homemade pizzas
- Wednesday casseroles (prepare on weekend and freeze)
- Theme nights (talk with British accents during dinner, end every sentence with a specific word, or only drink with your pinky in the air)

Remember though, celebrations can quickly become a time to over-indulge. Working together, preparing, shopping and cooking together to create healthier food options can help make everyone feel better about their food choices.

Eating meals together enhances the health and well-being of teens, yet fewer and fewer families are eating together at mealtime (Eisenberg et al., 2004). Life may seem hectic at times, but try to remember to take the time to cook together, talk together and always celebrate together! The health and well-being of today's youth depends on it.

Resources:

Website: thefamilydinnerproject.org

Board of Regents, Washington State University. (2005). *Eat Together, Eat Better*. Retrieved from <http://nutrition.wsu.edu/ETEB/>

Eisenberg, M.E., Olson, R. E., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., Bearinger, L. H. (2004, Aug). Correlations between family meals and psychosocial well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 158 (8).

"Parents Make a Difference" is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a program of the Department of Public Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Extension and local school districts. This newsletter is adapted from the UW-Extension newsletters "Whose Kids?...Our Kids!" This issue of "Parents Make a Difference" was written by Jennifer LaTour, UW-Extension Richland County and reviewed by Bev Doll and Sarah Hopkins, UW-Extension Grant County; Amy Mitchell, UW-Extension Crawford County, Mary Knellwolf, UW-Extension Lafayette County and Ruth Schrieffer and Deb Ivey, UW-Extension Iowa County. Thanks are extended to nearly 5,410 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2013 YRBS survey. Contact UW-Extension for further information: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; Crawford County (608) 326-0223; Iowa County (608) 930-9850; and Richland County (608) 647-6148. Or visit the website at: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/swys>