

Know! The Benefits Outweigh the Stress of Family Meals

Each fall, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASAColumbia) celebrates National Family Day; an initiative created to promote simple acts of parental engagement as key ways to help prevent risky substance use in children and teens. Know!, along with CASAColumbia have long endorsed regular family dinners as a prime opportunity for such parental engagement. However, just in time for National Family Day, a new study has been released that challenges the value of traditional family dinners by asking moms, “**Have family meals become more trouble than they’re worth?**”

While today it is common to find both moms and dads in the kitchen preparing dinner for their families, statistics show that the task continues to fall primarily on women, so researchers from North Carolina State University examined the stress family meals pose to moms in particular. After interviewing 150 women and spending hundreds of hours observing families of varying cultural backgrounds and social classes, researchers found a pattern of challenges consistently surrounding family meals:

1. **Lack of Time:** Between work, school and extra-curricular activities, simply finding a time for the whole family to sit down together is a feat in and of itself.
2. **Lack of Money:** Many moms feel the pressure to cook made-from-scratch, fresh, healthy meals (consisting of fruits, vegetables, lean meats and whole grains) which we hear health experts tout as a necessity for our children’s well-being and an end to the childhood obesity crisis in our country; yet this study showed that many families have difficulty affording such foods (eating healthy reportedly costs an extra \$550 per person per year); other moms simply feel overwhelmed with trying to keep up with such a food plan.
3. **Lack of Pleasing Picky Eaters:** Then there’s those picky eaters, who refuse the food mom has just spent the past hour or whole afternoon making.

After taking all this into account, researchers concluded that, “...*expectations (surrounding family meals) may cause more harm than good (for moms).*”

Know! respectfully disagrees. Families pressed for time and money cannot be disputed; it is a fact. As for the picky eaters, that’s a tough one too. But what cannot be discounted is the importance of the family meal. Teen surveys conducted by CASAColumbia consistently show that the more often kids eat dinner with their families, the less likely they are to drink, smoke or use other drugs.

The meal does not have to be fancy or include every food group to make a positive impact on your child. While the food is what brings families to the table, the significance of the family meal is something bigger; it’s about parents and children engaging in conversation, making connections and strengthening bonds; it’s about fostering consistent, warm, loving and stable parent/child relationships so that children are more likely to flourish in other areas of healthy adolescent development as well (including initiating positive social interactions with others; responding to situations with empathy; being cooperative with others; exhibiting a higher self-esteem; and making overall healthier lifestyle choices for themselves).

Dinnertime can be stressful and challenging at times, and it is by no means the only opportunity to engage your children in conversation and strengthen family ties. However, sitting across from your children at the kitchen table, sharing a meal while talking with them and actively listening to them (to

show you care about what's happening in their world) is of incredible value and worth – for children and parents.

SOURCES: [Sarah Bowen Sinikka Elliott Joslyn Brenton: The Joy of Cooking? 2014.](#) [CASAColumbia: Family Day, 2014.](#) [Today Parents: Farewell Family Meal – Stress of Cooking May Outweigh Benefits, Sept. 2014](#)

Know! is a
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