

What's For Dinner?

By Jill McTaggart

Since the 1970's when women joined the workforce in droves the "What's for dinner?" question has confounded them. The conundrum is in part logistical – finding the time and energy to plan, shop, and cook meals. But, for me, as a parent I knew deep down, emotionally, there were some other more intuitive reasons why I wanted a shared family meal (and not because my own amazingly efficient working mother always managed it).

Through research, what I found was that many recent studies have quantified my gut feeling about the importance of dinnertime. Here are my top 5 reasons to eat meals together at home as a family culled from recent academic studies.

1. Health. The Archive of Family Medicine study in 2000 showed that eating family dinner was associated with healthful dietary intake, including more fruits and vegetables and less fried food and soda.
2. Children will be better spoken and better read. A Harvard study found that complex and rich dinner conversations were more important than play, story time and other family events in the development of language and reading skills.
3. Averts risky teen behavior. A Columbia University study cites that teens are 42% less likely to drink, 59% less likely to smoke

tobacco and 66% less likely to try marijuana.

4. Adolescent girls will have less eating disorders according to a 2004 University of Minnesota study.

5. Working parents are happier. Published in July 2008, Brigham Young University found that among both mothers and fathers who made it home regularly for dinner, they felt more personal success and felt "more kindly" about their workplace.

While researching this article I stumbled upon a link for a website called bringbackdinner.com. Cool, I thought, a motivated mom is providing information that will help. As I opened the link it was immediately apparent that this was not a mom's site, it is sponsored by the KFC Corporation, yes Colonel Sanders et al. This internet misfire was serendipitous in that it brought me to a study proclaiming that family dinners will cause adults to be less obese. This 2007 study in Public Health Nutrition found that families who ate fast food for dinner more than three times a week ate more junk food, less fruits and vegetables than families who ate fast food less than three times a week. Adults tended to be more obese and have a higher BMI than non fast food eating adults. "Fast food can be a convenient alternative to cooking for busy families," said Kerri Boutelle, Ph.D., lead author and as-

sistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Minnesota Medical School. "But, frequently making fast food a family meal can negatively affect food choices in the house and the overall health of the family."

It is important to note that shared meals are not only about the food, but about the few moments that families take to sit face to face away from media, cell phones and other modern distraction. In a recent NPR segment on the family dinner, a noted researcher wondered aloud if the social and emotional benefits of dinner were a result of the actual meal or if they were caused by the functionality of a family who can coordinate and provide frequently shared meals. This notion coincides with my intuition that it is not only the healthful food but a time to build relationships and show one another that you truly care about them and what happened in the course of the day.

If this interaction is new to you and even a little awkward, an ice breaker that I like to use with my kids is the question: What was the best thing and what was the worst thing that happened today? This is a way to explore all the good that happens as well as the not so good that happens throughout the day. Hey, at this point any question is better than "What's for dinner?"—right?