

School-Aged Children's Family Meal Cognitions

K. Eck, MS, RD;¹ E. Santiago, MS, RD;¹ C. Delaney;¹ K. Shelnett, PhD, RD;² M. Olfert, PhD, RD;³ C. Byrd-Bredbenner, PhD, RD, FAND¹
¹Nutritional Sciences Department, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ; ²Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL; ³Department of Human Nutrition and Food, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV



HOMESTYLES

HEALTHY HOME HEALTHY FAMILY

Abstract

Objectives: Family meal (FM) benefits include improved school performance, stronger family bonds, and healthier child weights, yet little is known about kids' FM cognitions.

Methods: School aged children (6-to-11 years) (n=194) completed a survey and 37 participated in moderator-led focus group discussions on FMs.

Results: Surveyed children reported eating dinner as a FM 4.70±2.67SD days/week. Focus group discussions revealed that kids felt FMs were important because they gave their families a chance to spend time together—something that was limited outside mealtime due to busy schedules. Children also thought that FMs were important to their parents because they enjoyed family time and expected their kids to be present at FMs. However, kids reported many barriers to FMs: busy schedules (parents' work, kids' after school activities), chores, sibling conflicts, picky eaters, and some family members couldn't be present. Kids felt that having FMs was easier when parents got home from work early. Families were more likely to eat FMs on holidays and special occasions or when others were invited over for meals. Kids indicated that their parents planned meals ahead of time and used grocery lists. They also reported that parents had quick, easy meal options (pizza, mac & cheese) for busy nights. Kids felt they could have FM more often by helping with chores to give parents more time to cook or by helping prepare meals. Kids stated they were able to make simple meals (eggs, mac & cheese, smoothies), help with preparation (peel vegetables, cut produce), and do other meal-related chores (i.e., set table, load/unload dishwasher, wash dishes, pour drinks). Kids also reported they could help make FMs fun by turning it into a game of "restaurant" by pretending to be a chef or server. Ideas to make FMs less stressful and more pleasant included planning meals ahead, serving foods everyone wants to eat, watching TV at mealtime, and having pleasant conversations. Kids particularly enjoying talking about their day, sharing memories, and discussing upcoming plans during FMs. Mealtime behaviors kids did not like were when family members used their phones or argued.

Conclusion: Future nutrition education programs should help parents understand the value kids put on FMs and how kids can help increase the frequency and pleasantness of FMs.

Methods

- School-aged children (6-11 years old)
- Brief self-report survey
- Focus group discussion
- Constant comparison of data to identify data saturation point
- Content analysis to identify key themes in qualitative data



Funding Source

United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Grant Number 2017-680001-26351

Results

Children reported eating dinner as a FM 4.70±2.67SD days/week

Kids felt FMs were important because

- They gave families a chance to spend time together
- Parents enjoyed family time and expected their kids to be present

Barriers to FMs

- Busy schedules (parents' work, kids' after school activities)
- Chores
- Sibling conflicts
- Picky eaters
- Some family members can't be present

Facilitators of FMs

- Parents coming home from work early
- Holidays and special occasions or when others were invited for meals
- Quick, easy meal options (e.g., pizza, mac & cheese) for busy nights
- Kids helping with chores to give parents more time to cook
- **Kids helping prepare meals**
 - Making simple meals (e.g., eggs, mac & cheese, smoothies)
 - Helping with meal preparation (e.g., peel vegetables, cut produce)
 - Helping with other meal-related chores (e.g., set table, load/unload dishwasher, wash dishes, pour drinks).
- **Make FMs less stressful by**
 - Planning meals ahead
 - Serving foods everyone wants to eat
 - Watching TV at mealtime
 - Having pleasant conversations (talking about their day, sharing memories, and discussing upcoming plans)



What Kids Had to Say

"My favorite thing about family meals is getting to talk to each other and spend time together; otherwise you don't get to be with each other very much."

"My dad is always at work, so when we do get time to eat together it is important for him."

"Mom will ask how day was at school. She likes to know what we are doing. She enjoys the time we spend together while eating."

"We have more family meals when we invite people over for dinner."

"Sometimes I make the dinner and my mom helps me and they want to come eat it because that is what parents want to do."

"Maybe help them [parents] out with dinner so they don't have to do so much."

Conclusions

Future nutrition education programs should help parents understand the value kids put on FMs and how kids can help increase the frequency and pleasantness of FMs.