

Behaviors and Cognitions of Parents of Elementary School Children Related to Family Meals

K. Eck, MS, RD;¹ C. Delaney;¹ K. P. Shelnett, PhD, RD;² M. Olfert, PhD, RD;³ C. Byrd-Bredbenner, PhD, RD, FAND¹

¹Nutritional Sciences Department, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ; Department 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: Frequent family meals (FM) promote strong family bonds, improved school performance, and healthy child weights, yet little is known about parent cognitions related to FMs (e.g., values, barriers, facilitators).

Methods: Parents of 6-to-11 year-olds (n=185) completed a survey and 37 completed focus group discussions.

Results: Survey results reveal that 90% of parents look forward to FMs and eat an average of 6.88±4.35SD FM/week. Focus group participants reported that dinner was the meal most often eaten as a family. They valued FMs, rating them as important because FMs provided opportunities for conversation and family bonding. Common FM conversations included reviewing the day and talking about future plans. Parents emphasized the importance of limiting TV and phones at meals to promote conversation. Busy schedules, including child activities and parent work, were the greatest barrier to FMs. To cope with busy schedules, parents planned ahead, prepared meals in advance, used meal/grocery delivery services, and involved kids in meal preparation. Parents reported their kids assisted by washing dishes, setting/clearing the table, and helping to cook. Their kids could prepare sandwiches, cereal, and smoothies, and help pack their own lunches. Most parents did not allow kids to use the stove or oven unsupervised. Some thought that it was a hassle to let kids help and preferred that kids watch or not be involved. Parents felt a positive mealtime environment is important for building family relationships and fostering healthy relationships with food. Picky eaters and unpleasant conversation topics were noted by English-speaking parents as making meal times unenjoyable, while family conflict was mentioned by Spanish-speakers. Parents made meal times more enjoyable by involving kids in meal preparation and re-directing conversations away from unpleasant topics or conflicts. English-speakers reported that their kids' exposure to new foods at school helped them become more adventurous eaters. Spanish-speakers were mostly concerned about exposure to the unhealthy foods (burgers, pizza) kids are served at school.

Conclusion: Helping parents overcome the barriers of a busy schedule and promote FMs as a time to strengthen family bonds should be a focus of future nutrition education programs.

Methods

- **Sample**
 - Parents of children aged 6-11 years
 - English- and Spanish-speaking parents
- **Data Collection**
 - Survey (n=185)
 - Focus groups (n=37)
 - Trained Moderators and Notetakers
- **Qualitative Data Analysis**
 - Continuous Comparisons
 - Identification of Themes



"When they [kids] start doing [after school] activities, it makes it hard to have meals together."

Funding Source

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

Results

- **90%** of parents look forward to FM
- Families averaged **6.88±4.35SD** family meals/week
- Dinner was the most common FM
- **Parents felt FM**
 - Provided **communication & family bonding** opportunities
 - Should **limit technology** (TV, phones) use
- **Barriers** to FM include (child and parent) schedules
 - **Parents overcame barriers by**
 - Planning/preparing ahead
 - Using grocery/meal delivery services
 - Involving kids (wash dishes, set the table, help cook)
- **Positive meal times help**
 - Build family relationships
 - Foster healthy relationship with food
- **Unenjoyable meal times caused by**
 - Picky eaters
 - Unpleasant conversations
 - Family conflict
- **Parents promote positive meals by**
 - Involving kids in meal prep
 - Re-directing unpleasant conversations
- **Changes now that kids are in elementary school**
 - Exposed to new food → more adventurous eaters
 - Exposed to new food → prefer new unhealthy (burgers, pizza) options

"[At mealtime] phone are off, no technology is a rule, this way I can get more conversation out of them."



"Parents lead the conversation, so, if the parent sees it going negative, [they can] redirect it."



Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

- Survey was in English and Spanish
- Focus groups were led by trained moderators in English or Spanish using scripted a moderator's guide
- Geographic diversity (NJ, FL, WV)

Limitations

- The sample had low representation of fathers
- Results based on participant self-report

Conclusions

- Parents of elementary-aged kids believe that family meals are an important time for family bonding.
- Parents make time for an average of about 1 meal/day despite the challenges of busy schedules.
- Parents need opportunities to learn additional strategies for protecting FM time.

"I give each of my kids a responsibility, like chopping or stirring. I try to keep it simple, fun, and engaging."

