

The positive influence of family meals on children's food choice

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In a recent study, Dr Skafida from the Centre for Population Health Sciences and the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (University of Edinburgh) explored why family meals lead to better food choices among children. Eating the same food as their parents was most strongly associated with healthier diets in children. Food choice issues seem to play a more important role than type and place of meal.

Using a representative sample of 2,332 five-year-old children from Scotland, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the mothers of these children. The quality of a child's diet was measured by asking mothers about their children's consumption frequency of various food categories. The relationship between the quality of children's diets and meal occurrence, meal habits and meal enjoyment, was investigated. 'Meal occurrence' referred to whether children eat more full meals or have the tendency to snack throughout the day. 'Meal habits' looked at what mothers could recall about where, when and with whom their children eat. Additionally, mothers were asked about the perceived social quality of their children's meals, in order to collect data on 'meal enjoyment'.

Results showed that almost all children (99%) ate one main meal. Of these, most (75%) ate at regular times with one or two parents (90%) around. About 71% ate the same food as their parents. Some mothers (14%) reported that mealtimes were rushed, 19% said that never or only occasionally was there a chance to talk, and a quarter felt that mealtimes are never or only occasionally enjoyable for everyone.

In line with previous research, it was found that the quality of children's diets is "socially stratified", meaning children from less advantaged backgrounds also showed poorer quality diets. Furthermore, girls, firstborn, children of mothers with higher education and children of two-parent households showed healthier diets.

Meal habits and meal enjoyment were shown to have a significant effect on the dietary quality of the child. These relationships held true across differences in gender, education of the mother, employment status and/or household composition. Analysis of meal occurrence, on the other hand, indicated that those children who did not eat a main meal but rather snacked on crisps, fruit or sweets all day had significantly poorer diets. Higher quality diets were more present among children with a regular meal schedule, who were reported to have enjoyable and talkative meal times. Location of the meal, i.e. rooms traditionally linked with eating (e.g. kitchen, dining room) also had a positive impact on the dietary quality of the child.

While eating together with their parents or not was not a significant predictor for the quality of the children's diet, differences in the type of food eaten did influence dietary quality: the more often children ate the same food as their parents, the better the quality of the children's diet. The differences between these results and previous literature call for further analysis. Contrary to previous research, data from the present study suggests that eating together with the family is a far less important aspect of family meals than previously thought. When the author 'digs a little deeper' it becomes clear that the type of food eaten rather than the mere presence of the parents during mealtime accounts for differences in the dietary

quality of children. Eating the same food as the parents was the aspect of family meal habits most strongly associated with healthier diets in this study. These findings redirect the attention towards food choice issues, rather than the type and place of a meal. A children's diet has a higher nutritional quality if children are encouraged to eat what their parents eat.

Data obtained in this study has some limitations. It consists of self-reported answers from children's mothers, answers could be biased by the mothers' desired perception of their child and may not necessarily reflect the actual eating habits. Moreover, the role of the father is not explored any further in this study. Future research should include both parents' diets and dietary habits into the analysis.

Overall, the findings presented above show that eating habits develop during the early years of children in their families. Parents play a crucial role in influencing their children's dietary behaviour. Public health messages should target parents to encourage and enable them in making healthy food choices both for themselves and their children.

For further information:

[Skafida, V. \(2013\). The family meal panacea: exploring how different aspects of family meal occurrence, meal habits and meal enjoyment relate to young children's diets, *Sociology of Health & Illness* 35\(6\):906-923.](#)