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WELL

The Family Meal Is What Counts, TV On or Off

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)

Television viewing has long been linked with poor eating habits. So when [University of Minnesota](#) researchers embarked on a study of family meals, they fully expected that having the TV on at dinner would take a toll on children's diets.

But to their surprise, it didn't make much difference. Families who watched TV at dinner ate just about as healthfully as families who dined without it. The biggest factor wasn't whether the TV was on or off, but whether the family was eating the meal together.

"Obviously, we want people eating family meals, and we want them to turn the TV off," said Shira Feldman, public health specialist at the university's School of Public Health and lead author of the research. "But just the act of eating together is on some level very beneficial, even if the TV is on."

The research, published this month in *The Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, is the latest testament to the power of the family meal. While many parents worry about what their kids are eating — vegetables versus junk — a voluminous body of research suggests that the best strategy for improving a child's [diet](#) is simply putting food on the table and sitting down together to eat it.

The importance of the family meal has been shown mainly in studies from the University of Minnesota, Harvard and Rutgers that have looked at family eating habits of nearly 40,000 middle-school students and teenagers. The research has shown that those who regularly have meals with their parents eat more fruits, vegetables and calcium-rich foods, ingest more [vitamins](#) and nutrients, and consume less junk food. Some of the research has shown that kids who regularly sit down to a family meal are at lower risk for behaviors like [smoking](#) and drug and alcohol use.

But as is the case with all studies that observe people over time, the big question is whether the family meal really leads to healthier habits. Could it be that kids from happier, more health-conscious families are simply more likely to sit down to a family meal?

University of Minnesota researchers have sought to answer that question by looking at "family connectedness," which essentially measures the psychological health of a family. Children from highly connected families have been shown to eat healthier foods, get better grades and have lower risk for smoking and drug and alcohol use. But in the Minnesota research, whether the family was connected or troubled was less important than whether they regularly dined together. One study, published in *The Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* in 2004, found that even after controlling for family connectedness, kids who had seven or more family meals a week were far less likely to smoke, drink alcohol or use marijuana than those who had just one or none.

In the latest study measuring the effects of television, researchers surveyed the eating habits of about 5,000 middle and high school students in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The data were collected during the 1998-99 school year but analyzed only recently. About two-thirds of the students reported that they ate dinner with their parents at least three times a week. But about half of that group said they also watched television during the family meal.

Over all, the children ate healthier foods if the television was turned off, but the differences weren't as big as researchers expected.

The biggest effect was seen among the kids who didn't eat regular family meals at all. Girls who dined alone ate fewer fruits, vegetables and calcium-rich foods and more soft drinks and snack foods than girls who ate with their parents. And girls who ate with their parents ate more calories — up to 14 percent more, suggesting that dining alone puts girls at higher risk for [eating disorders](#). Boys who didn't eat with their parents had fewer vegetables and calcium-rich foods than family diners.

The lesson for parents, say the study authors, is that being together at dinner is what counts. Having the TV on during the meal, while not desirable, can also serve a purpose if it helps bring sullen teenagers and families to the table.

Why a family meal can make such a difference isn't entirely clear. It may be that parents simply put better food on the table when everyone gets together. People dining alone tend to eat pizza, for instance, while families who order pizza together tend to put vegetables or a salad on the table, Ms. Feldman noted.

It may also be that dining together allows parents to set a better eating example for their kids. And mealtime is often the only chance parents have to actually look over their busy teenagers, catch up on their lives and visually assess behavioral or physical changes that might signal problems.

Dr. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, who has led much of the Minnesota research, says that when parents hear the data about the importance of the family meal, they often feel guilty if work schedules and teenagers' extracurricular activities keep them from dining together.

The key, she said, is togetherness, not timing. A family that is scattered at the dinner hour might be able to meet regularly for breakfast instead. And even adding one or two more family meals to the week is better than nothing. "I would put the emphasis on just looking at where your family is now and seeing what you can do to improve," Dr. Neumark-Sztainer said. "I think many people just don't realize how important the family meal really is."