Family Dinner Meal Frequency and Adolescent Development: Relationships with Developmental Assets and High-Risk Behaviors


SUMMARY: There is some evidence that family routines may influence adolescents' health. Associations between family meal frequency, developmental assets and high-risk behaviors among adolescents across the United States were measured. Findings indicate that eating family meals together positively affects adolescent development.

KEY FINDINGS:
- About half of students in a two-parent household reported five to seven family dinners in the past week, whereas only one-third of single parent homes reported five to seven family dinners in the past week.
- Students who reported eating frequent family dinners were half as likely as students who reported eating very few family meals to report engaging in high-risk behaviors including alcohol and drugs, sexual intercourse, violence, and binge eating or purging.
- Students who reported eating frequent family dinner meals were twice as likely to report high self-esteem, feeling a sense of purpose, and having a positive outlook on the future compared to students who reported few family dinners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:
Military professionals could:
- Collaborate with organizations connected with military parents to emphasize the importance of cooking and eating family dinners together
- Facilitate after-school programs for youth to learn how to cook, meal prep and budget for groceries

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Offer cooking and meal preparation classes designed for a busy military schedule
- Offer programs that disseminate information to military parents on the importance of spending time together as a family, including during mealtimes

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Recommend integrating parenting education on family cohesion into existing service delivery systems for military families
- Promote programs that bring military families together to facilitate family support, positive family communication, parental involvement, and family boundaries

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.
METHODS

- Two-hundred and thirteen school districts gave the survey to eligible students.
- Information on family meal frequency and the 40 developmental assets were collected.
- Relationships between health outcomes, developmental assets, and family meal frequency were analyzed.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 99,462 6th to 12th grade students, of which 49,138 were males and 49,620 were females.
- The sample population was 86% White, 5% Multiracial, 4% Latino, 2% Asian American, and less than 2% Black and Native American.
- About 25% of students reported living in the country or on a farm, 34% reported living in a small town, 35% reported living in a town or small city, and 4% reported living in a large metropolitan area.

LIMITATIONS

- The cross-sectional design of the study prevented researchers from making the claim that the frequency of family meals lead to healthier behavioral results in adolescents.
- A high percentage of students lived in rural areas or small towns, limiting the ability to generalize the findings to larger metropolitan areas.
- Relying on self-report from only one source could have biased the results of the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect longitudinal data in order to determine if family dinner meal frequency predicts adolescent outcomes.
- Gather data from a larger sample, including a higher percentage from urban areas, in order to allow for broader generalization of findings.
- Implement videotape methodology during family meals to collect objective assessment of family functioning, meals per week, and family dynamics.

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design

Appropriate
Research Plan and Sample

Methods

Appropriate
Measurement and Analysis

Limitations

Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works