

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

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

Fulkerson, J. A., Story, M., Mellin, A., Leffert, N., Neumark-Sztainer, D., & French, S. A. (2006). Family dinner meal frequency and adolescent development: Relationships with developmental assets and high-risk behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 39*(3), 337-345. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.12.026

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

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METHODS

- Two-hundred and thirteen school districts gave the survey to eligible students.
- Information on family meal frequency and the 40 developmental assests 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



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