

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Family Meals and Child Academic and Behavioral Outcomes

Miller, D. P., Waldfogel, J., & Han, W. J. (2012). Family meals and child academic and behavioral outcomes. *Child Development*, 83(6), 2104-2120. doi:10.1111/j/1467-8624.2012.01825.x

SUMMARY: In this study of 21,400 children, researchers evaluated the association between family meal frequency (i.e., how often families eat meals together) and child academic and behavioral health outcomes. When controlling for a number of potentially contributory factors, there were no significant associations between family meal frequency and childhood outcomes. The findings contradict findings from most previous studies examining these factors among adolescents.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Seventy percent of children reported frequent family dinners; however, the frequency of family dinners declined over the course of the study as children matured.
- More family breakfasts were associated with increased academic performance and decreased behavioral problems, while more family dinners were associated with decreased academic performance and increased behavior problems.
- When controlling for characteristics of children and families, there were no significant associations between family meal frequency and child academic or behavioral outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Develop online modules to teach parents about helpful ways to spend time with their children
- Collaborate with nutrition programs to offer classes that teach parents and children both how to plan healthy meals and schedule time for the family to eat together

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer activities that provide opportunities to enhance family cohesion outside of regular family meal times
- Collaborate with agencies designed to work with parents to foster positive academic and behavioral outcomes in children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend the highest levels of services and supports to children with poor academic and behavioral outcomes and the greatest need
- Encourage flexible work hours for Service members with children living at home to allow for engagement in regular family activities

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METHODS

- Data for this study came from a large, nationally representative sample of children.
- The frequency of family breakfasts and dinners, as well as data on behavior problems and academic performance, were obtained from parents, children, and teachers.
- The associations between family meal frequency, academic outcomes, and behavior problems among children while they were in Kindergarten, 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 8th grades were evaluated.

PARTICIPANTS

- Data were drawn from 21,400 kindergarteners (51% male) in the 1998–1999 school year; by the eighth grade wave of data collection, approximately 9,700 children completed the child assessment.
- Participants were White (55%), Latino (18%), Black (15%), Asian American (10%), and Native American (2%).
- The average age of participating children was 6.09 years (SD = 0.37).

LIMITATIONS

- Parents' higher reporting of family meal frequency relative to rates reported in previous studies may reflect social desirability bias responding.
- Due to considerable attrition over time, large amounts of missing data were imputed for analyses, and children remaining in the sample differed from those who were lost to attrition, potentially skewing the results.
- Quantity of family meals may be a weak proxy for other important, uninvestigated factors related to family meal time (e.g., communication, quality time, family support).

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the role of family meals as a mediator between other family factors (e.g., cohesion, communication) and child academic and behavioral outcomes.
- Conduct follow-ups with children into adolescence to clarify whether the discrepancy between these and prior findings is partially attributable to the difference in age of participants or other methodological differences
- Evaluate the effect of quality of interactions during family meals in addition to the quantity of shared meals

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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