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Frequent Family Dinners Protect Our Children

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Theme

Frequent family dinners have multiple benefits to children and teens that aid in positive youth development.

Introduction

Family gatherings around the table have been seen as a national pastime throughout human history. In this fast-paced generation, however, families are slowly drifting apart for many reasons: demanding jobs that require less time at home, extra-curricular activities in schools and conveniences of communication that do not need the family to be present while engaging in conversations; ability and access to drive or having easier transportation systems, as well as other activities – such as television viewing, sports, etc. – have trumped family meals. Yet research has consistently found that frequent family dinners can protect youth from a number of dangerous elements.

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GROUP DISCUSSION

Have the group report what they think interferes with family meals in this modern world.

The following information is from an extensive review of the literature and from original research conducted at the Institute for the Prevention of Addiction at Andrews University on the topic of family dinners. Research has found that family dinners have multiple ways it leads to positive outcomes for youth. Family meals create an environment where there is an opportunity for the family to communicate to each other leading to lasting bonds between the parents and their children. They are a place to discuss problems and solutions and can create a form of tradition/ritual that promote unity, stability, and routine. In addition, parents can use family mealtimes to monitor the whereabouts of the children, get to know and hear about the friends and people that they interact with away from home and help give them advice and guidance for decisions in the future.

Family meals are also associated with better social and mental stability. Children and teenagers who engage in family dinners and spend time with their parents are found to have higher self-esteem, are less depressed and have lower rates of suicide ideation. Family meals contribute to better eating habits and nutrition

intake and eating meals together provide an opportunity to promote more positive food choices among adolescents.

Many think that young people these days do not enjoy these kinds of activities but studies have found that the vast majority still enjoy it. One study reveals that 79% of teenagers enjoy dining with their families. Another study reports that children enjoy the social aspects of eating together as a family and that family meals are considered pleasurable occasions; they become part of the day which they look forward to with 65% of teenagers and 75% of parents saying that they would be willing to give up a weekend activity if that would enable them to have dinner as a family.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Have the group reminisce about their positive memories around family dinners from their childhood. What did they enjoy about their family meals as a child?

Family Dinners as Protection

The adolescent and teenage years are a time of exploration and when they will decide what type of person they will be when they grow up. However this searching can lead to decisions that will result for them to engage in unhealthy and risky paths. The main threat to adolescents' health in the United States is the behaviors that put their health at risk due to the negative choices that they make. The risky behaviors that adolescents typically participate in include alcohol, tobacco, substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, eating disorders, and delinquent activities such as theft and being part of a gang. These risk factors harm the adolescent physically and psychologically and they affect their mental well-being as well. At this stage their thoughts on their self-value, body and/or self-image, depression, suicide ideation, and decision-making skills can present as major challenges in their lives.

Studies on family meals focus on the advantages of frequency on family dinners. Due to the advantages that family dinners offer, the increased number of times families have dinner together have shown decreased rates of risky behaviors and an increase of positive behaviors. Having frequent meals at least 5 times a week provide the opportunities to reduce the likelihood that adolescents/teenagers will participate in alcohol drinking, substance abuse, sexual activities (or early participation), and develop eating disorders. Family meals not only offer protection during the teen years, but extend to the first two years while kids are away at college. Adventist college students who are 18 and 19 years old and have 5 family dinners a week when home, are significantly less likely to use alcohol in the past year.

Family dinners not only reduce risky behaviors, but also increase the safety of our youth. Recent research found that the likelihood that one will become victim to any number of situations decreases the more frequent time one participates in family dinners. They were less likely to be bullied at school, be slapped by a boy/girlfriend, and date raped. In addition, they are even more apt to take safety precautions such as wearing a seatbelt and a bicycle helmet. This is a fascinating result because family dinner produces such a strong protective factor that it would increase the protection of an individual from becoming a victim to someone or something. Family dinners are packed with such strong influences that if the environment of the mealtime is positive and it is practiced frequently enough, many unwanted behaviors and practices can be avoided.

There are some important things to keep in mind when having a family meal; it should be a pleasant experience. If there is constant family conflict present, research has found that adolescent and teenagers think family dinners are more of a negative experience than a positive. The family table is not a time to criticize and attack one another. Of course, studies have also found that dislike of

food being served during family meals also can bring a negative attitude to the table.

With so many families being pulled in many directions, family meals at 6 p.m. five times a week may not be realistic. Family meals don't have to be at the traditional dinner time, it can be earlier or later on some days. If you can get up earlier, the meal can also be at breakfast time. Weekends can be a time of special meals where higher priority is given to family togetherness. The point is to have face to face time around an enjoyable activity where there can be a good solid conversation.

In order for that conversation to take place, there shouldn't be any distraction. So that means for kids and parents the TV should be off, phones and tablets should not be at the table, and let the phone go to voice mail. Get unplugged and enjoy!!

GROUP DISCUSSION

What are some ways that family meals can be more enjoyable for the whole family? When is a good time for your family to have more regular meals together?
