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## The Family Mealtime Study: Parent Socialization and Context During Family Meals

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## **The Family Mealtime Study: Parent Socialization and Context During Family Meals**

### **Abstract**

Research on the family mealtime has shown its importance for youths' dietary attitudes and behaviors. Youths who have more frequent family meals often have more healthful dietary behaviors. However, little is known about the context and processes related to how family mealtimes affect youths' dietary behaviors. To address this gap, we examined the context of family mealtimes and parent socialization that occurs during family meals through mealtime observations and interviews. Family mealtimes are valued by parents, and our findings can be useful to Extension professionals in educating parents and families regarding shaping of family mealtimes, feeding strategies, and nutrition.

**Keywords:** [mealtime](#), [family](#), [youth](#), [food](#), [dietary behaviors](#)

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### **Introduction**

Family mealtimes are important in developing youths' dietary attitudes and behaviors. Youths who have frequent family meals consume more fruits, vegetables, grains, and calcium-rich foods and less unhealthful food such as chips and soda (Andaya, Arredondo, Alcaraz, Lindsay, & Elder, 2011; Fruh, Fulkerson, Mulekar, Kendrick, & Clanton, 2011; Larson & Story, 2010). However, there remains a gap in understanding the processes by which these benefits occur. Eating patterns in children start developing at an early age (Birch, Savage, & Ventura, 2007), and dietary behaviors carry over from childhood through adulthood (Kelder, Perry, Klepp, & Lytle, 1994). Family mealtime might be a platform through which processes such as parental modeling and socialization take place that influence youths' dietary behaviors (Berge, 2009). Therefore, understanding the context and processes surrounding family mealtimes could support the efforts of Extension practitioners and researchers in improving youths' dietary behaviors.

The purpose of our study was to better understand parental beliefs about family mealtimes and socialization practices during family mealtimes. We addressed the following research questions: (a) What kinds of socialization

related to food, eating, and healthful behaviors do parents engage in during family mealtimes? and (b) What are parental perceptions of family mealtimes related to socialization goals, mealtime context, meaning, and challenges? Data reported in this article were drawn from a larger mixed-methods study that examined parental socialization, family meal context, and youths' dietary behaviors. Findings presented here focus on parental perceptions and socialization practices around family mealtimes.

## Methods

We surveyed 100 families in a midwestern state, and participants in the study reported here were a subsample of those families. The criterion for our larger study was families with at least one child aged 11–18 years living at home. Parents and adolescents who completed the surveys and who were interested in an observation portion of the study contacted us. All interested families were selected to be in the observation portion of the study. We video recorded a family meal at each participant's home, and all family members, including younger children, were present. We were not present during the recordings. Forty parents and their families/children in the subsample participated in the mealtime observations. At the outset, five families were recorded twice within a 1-week period to identify any differences in participants' behaviors that could be attributed to social desirability. The behaviors of the families were similar across the two sessions, as participants quickly acclimated to the presence of the video cameras. A single mealtime was recorded for the remainder of the sample. Families were compensated \$50.

After completion of mealtime observations, we invited all parents to participate in interviews about their thoughts and experiences regarding family mealtimes. Interested participants were interviewed at a time and location that was convenient for them. We used a semistructured interview protocol and audio recorded the interviews. We interviewed 20 parents, and each interview lasted approximately 30 min. Participants were compensated \$30. Parent and child demographics are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows the interview protocol.

**Table 1.**  
Parent Demographic Variables

Variable	Observation sample ( <i>n</i> = 40) Interview sample ( <i>n</i> = 20)	
	%	%
Relationship to child		
Mother	80.0	75.0
Stepmother	2.5	5.0
Father	17.5	20.0
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	82.5	70.0
African American	10.0	20.0
Hispanic/Latino	2.5	5.0
Other	5.0	5.0
Marital status		
Married/committed relationship	77.5	60.0
Divorced/separated	15.0	25.0

Single	7.5	15.0
Highest school grade completed		
Finished high school/GED	7.5	5.0
Some college/training after high school	22.5	35.0
Finished college	60.0	55.0
Advanced degree (e.g., master's, PhD, MD)	10.0	5.0
Employment status		
Working full-time	52.5	70.0
Working part-time	25.0	15.0
Stay-at-home caregiver	17.5	10.0
Not working for pay (retired, student, unable to work)	5.0	5.0
Public assistance		
No	82.5	65.0
Yes	17.5	35.0
Total household income		
Less than \$20,000	12.2	25.0
\$20,000–\$34,999	19.5	35.0
\$35,000–\$49,999	12.2	5.0
\$50,000–\$74,999	29.3	30.0
\$75,000–\$99,999	19.5	5.0
\$100,000 or more	7.3	—

Note. Cell with — indicates no value to be reported.

**Table 2.**  
Child Demographic Variables

Variable	Observation sample (n = 40) Interview sample (n = 20)	
	%	%
Gender		
Male	55.0	45.0
Female	45.0	55.0
Grade		
6	20.0	20.0
7	15.0	10.0
8	10.0	10.0
9	12.5	5.0
10	17.5	20.0
11	15.0	20.0

12	7.5	10.0
Graduated/college	2.5	5.0
School type		
Public	60.0	80.0
Private	20.0	10.0
Home	20.0	10.0
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	82.5	70.0
African American	7.5	15.0
Hispanic/Latino	2.5	5.0
American Indian/Native American	2.5	5.0
Other	5.0	5.0

**Figure 1**  
Interview Protocol

Prompt: Please think about your most recent family meal, or a typical family meal over the past week.

Question	Subquestions/prompts
Who was present during the mealtime?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any rules regarding being present during mealtime?</li> <li>• If there were family members not present, why were they not present? Tell me more about having all members present during mealtimes.</li> </ul>
What types of food were being served during the meal?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who decides the food for the meal?</li> <li>• Do you usually cook, have convenience meals, eat out, take out, etc.?</li> <li>• Tell me more about the process of deciding what food to serve for the meal.</li> <li>• Does the type of food served play a role in mealtimes?</li> <li>• Tell me more about the way the meal is served.</li> <li>• Do you ever have family meals outside of your home, either at someone else's place or outside at an eatery? If yes, how often?</li> </ul>
Who prepared the food?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was there help in food preparation?</li> <li>• Can you tell me more about grocery shopping?</li> <li>• How long does it take for the food to be prepared/cooked?</li> </ul>

- How long does it take for the cleanup after the meal? Who does the cleanup?
- Did everyone sit down at the meal at the same time?
- Why or why not?
- Was there any conversation during the mealtime?
- If yes, what were the topics of the conversation?
  - Who talked during the mealtime?
  - Is there anyone who guides the conversation? Who and how?
  - If there was no conversation, why?
- How long did the meal last?
- Did you have a TV switched on in the same room you were dining in?
- Were there any technological devices (e.g., cell phones, tablets, laptops, mp3 devices) around the dinner table?
- Were any of the devices being used during the mealtime?
  - Share with me some thoughts on technological devices and TV usage during mealtimes.
- Thinking about the mealtime that you have described so far—was this a typical mealtime?
- What are some of your thoughts about family mealtimes in general?
- How do you view your own family mealtimes in general?
- What do family mealtimes mean to you?
  - What do you think family mealtimes mean to your child(ren)?
  - What do you think family mealtimes mean to your spouse (if anything)?
  - Do you think mealtimes would be different if there were younger/older children at home?
  - If only one child is at home, do you think family mealtimes would be different if there were more than one child living at home?
  - Tell me more about family meals (if any) you had growing up.
- Is there anything that you would like to change or do differently regarding your own family mealtimes?
- If yes, what and why?

Is there anything else you would like to share about family mealtimes, either about your own or in general?

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through open thematic analysis, a process in which categories are developed from the data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We coded mealtime observation recordings in 10-s increments. Five coders wrote descriptions of mealtime behaviors that occurred during each segment of the observation. All coders were trained by the primary investigator. Each research team member coded an observation and met with the primary investigator before coding other observations. This process ensured that all members were coding the observations consistently. Twenty percent of the observation and interview data were coded by two researchers to ensure interrater reliability. There was over 90% agreement in coding. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

We used NVivo10 to code and analyze both the observations and the interviews. For the observations, we read each observation (descriptions of occurrences during each 10-s block) and clustered the experiences and interactions into meaning units, which were used for generating initial codes. We refined codes by combining or separating codes. We developed themes from codes and compared each code to the relevant theme to ensure that it matched the theme. We also added codes that matched to the existing themes, using constant comparison to determine whether the code belonged to the theme or another theme was warranted. Finally, the essence of each theme was related to the primary research question. Regarding the interviews, we transcribed them verbatim and systematically organized data by initial categories/questions. We coded data through thematic analysis and constant comparison in NVivo, using the same approach we applied in coding the observation data.

## Findings

Six themes emerged from the analysis: parental rules and expectations, parental dietary behaviors and modeling, parental feeding strategies, relationship building through conversation and connection, mealtime challenges, and desired mealtime changes. The first three themes were derived from observation and interview data. The other themes were derived from interview data only. In the subsections that follow, each theme is described in detail. The codes for each theme, corresponding descriptions, and observation notes and/or interview quotes are presented in the thematic tables (Tables 3–8). Participant IDs are listed in parentheses.

### Parental Rules and Expectations

All parents had rules and expectations regarding family mealtimes. Most parents wanted children to try foods at least once and finish food on their plates before having more. Parents also had rules requiring children to be home for family meals. Some parents expected family members to be home for meals every day, and some tried to arrange family meals at least once a week. Most parents also required children to eat at the table with other family members during meals.

**Table 3.**

Parental Rules and Expectations

Code	Description	Observation notes	Interview quotes
Parental	Parents wanted children to try	Mother took child's fork	"We have a one-bite rule that you have to at least try

rules about children trying new foods	new foods at least once. Parents required children to taste new foods, but did not require them to finish all the food on their plates.	and put some food on it. She then told him to take a bite and said it was "really, really good with the cheese on it." He made a face. Mother said he had to take at least one bite. (48)	something, at least one bite. You don't have to like it. You don't have to finish it, but you need to at least try one bite of everything and then you're free." (52) "It's really important to me that they at least try some things. If they don't like the way it looks, I just ask that they try it." (24)
Parental rules about children having more food	Parents wanted children to finish food on their plates before having more.	Son wanted second helping of pasta when he saw his brothers getting more. Mother told him he had to finish his cantaloupe and beans first. (16)	"If they're going to have seconds, they have to eat everything that's there [on their plates]. They can't just have seconds of the main dish and not eat the green beans. So if you want seconds, you have to finish the green beans first." (16)
Parental expectations about family members being home for meals	Some families expected everyone to be home for meals every day unless they had work, travel, or extracurricular activities. Parents tried to adjust family mealtimes to accommodate busy schedules.	Before the meal started, mother called son to ask where he was. She told him that they were going to have dinner soon and that he needed to come home. (1)	"We eat about 6 o'clock every night, somewhere between 6 and 6:30. And then everybody has to be here. And the only reason that you can't sit at the table is if you're sick. Otherwise, you have to sit at the table." (48) "I try to at least make sure one day a week we're eating together. There are seven of us and the oldest has a job. . . . If it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen, but the majority of the time, it actually happens." (18) "It is expected to be home for dinner whenever possible. We try to have family meals but the schedules are always busy." (6)
Parental expectations about staying at the table during family mealtimes	Some parents required children to ask to be excused before leaving the table. Some children had practiced this behavior since young and understood the concept of everyone staying at the table until the meal is over. Some parents gave permission for children to leave the table as soon as they were done eating.	Daughter asked mother if she could be excused. Mother replied, "Dad is still eating." (51) Mother and daughter finished the meal earlier and left because daughter had an afterschool activity that she had to go to, and mother had to take her. (52)	"They [children] have a rule to stay at the table, but they don't always do that, so they get up and walk a lap around the room and come back and take a bite and walk a little while. But there's a rule against that." (48) "They're supposed to . . . the rule is you're supposed to ask if you can be excused when we're done." (52) "Now that they're older, we really don't have to. I guess we do have rules because they were put in place when they were younger and I just don't think of them so much as rules anymore." (74) "Unless there's an important discussion, they're free to go as soon as they're done eating." (76)

## Parental Dietary Behaviors and Modeling

Parents modeled dietary behaviors during meals. We observed parents behaving in ways they wanted children to emulate with regard to healthful eating. Some parents reported intentionally teaching and modeling healthful eating during family meals. We also observed that children imitated parents' less healthful dietary behaviors.

**Table 4.**



Parental Dietary Behaviors and Modeling

Code	Description	Observation notes	Interview quotes
Intentional parental modeling of dietary behaviors	Parents used family mealtimes as opportunities to model healthful dietary behaviors and to teach children about food and nutrition.	Father pointed to food on a plate and said to son, "This is okra. It's good for you." Father then ate the okra. (7)	"We try to make healthy choices, teach the kids how to eat healthy during mealtimes." (76) "Yeah, by seeing us and what we are eating, how we are eating, maybe by seeing that, they can learn how to eat. Most of the time, we show them, 'Yeah, this is what we need to eat, and this is good.' (7) 'It's important for me to model as well as practice the healthy eating habits for them [children]. That was something that was . . . done in my household . . . so I am just trying to build those healthy habits too." (3)
Unintentional parental modeling of dietary behaviors	Children imitated parents' healthful and unhealthful dietary behaviors during family mealtimes, even when parents did not intentionally model these behaviors.	Father finished his bun with meat and said he would have another. Mother said he should. Son said he should [get seconds] too. (3) Mother placed lettuce on her plate and added salad dressing on the lettuce. Daughter took lettuce and added salad dressing on it as well. (52) Mother drank soda while she was setting the dinner table. Daughter asked for soda. Mother mentioned that there would be soda during dinner, and daughter cheered. (12)	

Parental Feeding Strategies

Parents used a variety of feeding strategies when children refused to eat or try certain foods, or overate certain foods. These strategies included serving food children would eat, asking children whether they wanted or had tried certain foods, placing food on children's plates, telling children to eat, denying children food, and threatening to take away food or nonfood privileges.

**Table 5.**  
Parental Feeding Strategies

Code	Description	Observation notes	Interview quotes
Serving food	Some parents referred to their		"I have modified . . . they don't like casserole

<p>children will eat</p>	<p>children as "picky eaters" and tried to serve food the children would eat. Some parents rotated the foods served according to family members' preferences so that everyone would have his or her favorite foods during the week.</p>	<p>so instead of making something that's like a casserole, I have to make the dish separate . . . so I decided to modify some of the meals just to get them . . . to eat as much as they can." (6) "My son is pickier than anyone else, and so a lot of times . . . if I make something he doesn't like for lunch, I'll try to make something he likes for dinner or the other way around." (3)</p>
<p>Asking children to eat</p>	<p>Some parents asked whether children wanted or had tried a food item. Parents often encouraged children to try each food item served during the meal.</p>	<p>Mother asked whether children wanted fruit and passed the fruit bowl around. (55) Mother asked son whether he had tried the broccoli. (1)</p>
<p>Placing food on children's plate and/or telling children to eat</p>	<p>Sometimes parents placed food on children's plates and told them to eat the food.</p>	<p>Father told son he wanted him to eat a couple of potatoes and placed them on son's plate. Father said that he [son] needed to eat them and that they were not going to hurt him. (29) Mother told son to make sure he ate the rest of the food on his plate. (46) Daughter said she did not want her fruit. Mother told her she had to eat it. Daughter pouted. (5)</p>
<p>Denying children food or taking away food rewards</p>	<p>Some parents reported withholding dessert when children refused to eat food that was served during the meal. Some parents denied certain food items if children had consumed too much of them during the meal.</p>	<p>Son was whining about the food on his plate. Mother told son he would not get dessert if he did not eat the food on his plate. (24) Everyone had a cookie after dinner. Daughter could not have her cookie until she finished her dinner. (41) Daughter was jumping around and laughing during dinnertime. Mother called out her name in a stern manner and told her that she assumed daughter would not want dessert</p>

because of the way she was acting. (43) Daughter asked mother whether she could have more pepperoni. Mother said no. Daughter asked why. Mother said it was because she [daughter] had eaten enough. (33) Daughter asked whether she could have the last slice of bread. Father asked how many she had had. Daughter replied two. Father then asked the other children how many they had had. Youngest son replied one. Father gave last slice to youngest son. Daughter pouted. Father said she had had enough bread. Daughter said she was still hungry. Father said she could have more soup or tomatoes if she was still hungry. (42)

Taking away nonfood privileges	Some parents threatened to take away nonfood privileges, such as after-meal activities, if children did not finish their meals.	Mother told daughter that she needed to eat or she would not be going out to play. (56)	"You know, I didn't want them to just take two bites and then run off and go play. So I have to tell them to sit and eat, or else they won't get to go out afterwards . . . that's my rule." (20)
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## Relationship Building Through Conversation and Connection

All parents reported that family mealtimes were one of the most important things in their lives. Parents mentioned that mealtimes were an opportunity to spend time together as a family in a relaxed environment and that mealtimes were important for family communication and connection. When family members missed mealtimes because of work or busy schedules, they reporting feeling disconnected from one another.

**Table 6.**  
Relationship Building Through Conversation and Connection

Code	Description	Interview quotes
Family mealtimes as an opportunity to spend time together	Several parents reported that mealtime was the only time the family could get together to talk, bond, and connect. Parents felt	"To me, it gives me an opportunity to bond with my kids. They . . . pretty much are free to talk about whatever they want to talk about, say whatever they want to say. . . . just pretty much a free time." (12) "I think it's super, super important. And it might . . . be one of the most

family meals gave some routine and structure to families. . . . important things because . . . it's the one time that we're spending together as a family, and especially as everybody's getting older, they're busy and they're not here and you don't see them . . . I think it's super, super important." (52)

Family mealtimes as a way to connect family members  
 Parents reported feeling less connected without family meals.  
 Parents felt family mealtimes help strengthen family bonds.

"I do notice that when we don't eat together or when we do eat out, there isn't that feeling of cohesiveness. There's not as much laughter, not as much family connectedness." (3) "He [father] feels out of touch when he is away and unable to have family dinners. He misses that time and feels a bit left out. Family mealtime is a way that he can stay connected before he goes out of town for work. . . . I think when you're out of town, you miss it because stuff will go on, and the girls and I will have conversations. . . . When he gets back . . . we'll be at the table talking, and he'll kinda look at us . . . I think he feels out of loop." (74)

"I think more people need to have family meals. I think that's one of the reasons people are so separated right now. . . . they don't take even 15 to 20 minutes out of their life to sit down with their family." (37) "We hear so much about how families are so broken now because there's no communication. . . . everybody's catching up with everybody's life because we're not with each other during the day, so we're just all catching up with each other's life [during family mealtimes]. . . . And I know a lot of families don't [have family meals] but I just can't [not have family meals]." (90)

## Mealtime Challenges

Participants reported several challenges to having regular family meals, including busy schedules and difficulty preparing healthful meals that satisfy everyone's tastes. Mothers were usually the ones who encountered the difficulties because they often prepared the meals.

**Table 7.**  
Mealtime Challenges

Code	Description	Interview quotes
Busy schedules of parents and children	Parents' work and school as well as children's school and afterschool activities were barriers to having regular family meals.	"I work a lot. I really do, and sometimes I won't be here to eat dinner with them." (12) "There are times I'm in school and . . . sometimes I make them all [children] sit at the table and eat, but there are times that I sit out there [by the desk]. But I try not to . . . but sometimes I'm like doing homework and stuff. That's like twice a month maybe." (16) "For me . . . I'm in grad school. So Monday nights, I have night class from 6 to 10. My daughter, she goes back and forth between my mom and my apartment, so, like, if she's at my mom's place, she'll just have supper at my mom's place." (95) "So if somebody has an early practice or an activity that interferes or if I have a meeting, sometimes we don't all make it to the family meals or . . . some of the family may eat earlier

than others so that they can leave and go to practice or games or something like that." (3) "There'll probably be less time where we'll have to be together as they [children] get older with more afterschool activities and choirs and all that type of stuff and when they get jobs and stuff. So I don't see us always being able to have, like, family meals." (86) "Usually, they're [children] not here [because of] school activities or practices, sports. It is [a challenge], yeah, especially in high school. They're involved with a lot of things so getting everyone together is a challenge during the week." (20)

Challenges in preparing healthful food that everyone likes

Parents faced difficulties in preparing healthful food that family members enjoyed eating.

"Satisfying everybody's likes and dislikes, like their interest in food and stuff. So some people want this and some don't. Some like it and some don't." (23) "It can be a challenge with kids to find healthy meals and be together and yeah it can be . . . it's a task." (89) "My younger boy is inquisitive about new foods. He looks at the food that I make for other people, like for work, and he is curious and asks why I don't make that for him. But when I do make it and new food is introduced at the table, he doesn't necessarily want to try it, and I don't know how to get him to try it. Then, if my other son, his older brother, doesn't like the food, he will absolutely not try it." (23)

Difficulties in conducting mealtimes

Parents sometimes faced difficulties in carrying out mealtimes because of children's picky eating. Mothers usually prepared family meals, and they reported that prepping, cooking, and organizing mealtimes were time consuming and exhausting.

"I want my kids to remember having meals as a family and it being a good time even if it's hard and exhausting feeding all of them and making sure there's enough for everybody." (16) "It takes a lot of patience . . . We have trouble with [children] wanting to leave the table every five minutes to use the bathroom or something or clean up or whatever." (24) "I work until like four, and it's just kind of rush getting everything ready for the mealtime. . . . Sometimes when he'll [father] be doing something, you know like we have other things going on, it's just a little frustrating. Like today I was trying to get the cornbread made, and I was trying to get all the things cut up so. . . . it's a little stressful. Sometimes things don't quite turn out the way you want them to because you burn something." (90)

## Desired Mealtime Changes

Overall, parents were satisfied with their current family mealtimes. However, most wished they could have longer and less rushed meals. Parents also wished they had more time to prepare family meals and wanted to improve the nutritional quality of their family meals. Some parents wanted to have more meaningful and engaging conversations during family meals.

**Table 8.**  
Desired Mealtime Changes

Code	Description	Interview quotes
Parental desire for	Most parents wished they had less	"There are times I wish we could get more meals together. . . . I just

longer/more mealtimes	busy schedules so that they could have longer or more frequent family mealtimes.	wish things weren't always busy, but it's just the reality of the world that we live in." (20) "It doesn't happen as often as we would like, with everybody's schedule and practices . . . like meetings and whatnot, but it's important that at least a few times a week, we try." (89) "I guess I would like for us to sit longer so that, you know, we could spend more time . . . like not rush . . . it just seems like we eat fast and we're on to the next thing, so it would be nice to maybe linger at the meal or at the table a little bit longer." (6)
Parental desire for more time to prepare food	Parents wanted more time to cook different foods and try new recipes.	"And maybe if I wasn't in school, I would love to be able to cook more, like out of a recipe book, or place more ingredients. . . . like it would be nice to be able to make, like, spaghetti and meat sauce from scratch." (95)
Parental desire for more nutritious family meals	Parents wanted to prepare healthful meals for family mealtimes.	"I would really love to have somebody plan my meals for me, like to have a dietitian or to have somebody just to make the list and say this is what you're going to do this week . . . this is going to be your food, this is going to be your vegetable, this will be your fruit, this is . . . a new idea I want you try." (90)
Parental desire for more meaningful and engaging mealtime conversations	Some parents wanted to talk about different things during family meals to engage family members. Parents felt family meals were an opportunity for family conversations. Parents thought engaging conversations help strengthen familial relationships.	"The one thing I want to do is . . . there's, like, card games that you can buy that are, like, family meal conversations, and I think those would be really fun, so I've always wanted to get one of those . . . I think that'd be really fun to do. Because we've done . . . High-Low, where we'll go around and tell . . . the best thing, their high about the day, and then the bad thing about the day. . . . I want to do that more, so that would be one thing I would change, kind of direct the conversations like that." (16) "I just read in a magazine [an activity] that I thought about doing. And that was somebody has taken a clear table cloth and you put like a world map under it and then they would talk about stories where somebody would travel around the world and they would use the map that was on the table already to talk about while they ate." (76)

## Discussion and Implications

The first purpose of our study was to examine socialization related to food, eating, and healthful behaviors. We found that parents had rules and expectations regarding family meals, modeled dietary behaviors, and engaged in a variety of feeding strategies.

Parents required children to try new foods, finish food on their plates before having more, be home for family meals, and eat at the table. Parents also engaged in socialization behaviors that reflected their views about nutrition and mealtimes. Research has shown that parent modeling positively affects youths' dietary behaviors (Campbell, Crawford, & Ball, 2006; Larson & Story, 2010; Marshall, Golley, & Hendrie, 2011; Tysoe & Wilson, 2010), and the parents in our study used mealtimes to model healthful eating and were observed modeling and discussing healthful eating. However, parents also modeled unhealthy dietary behaviors, and children imitated those behaviors as well. This knowledge is important for Extension professionals seeking to educate caregivers on

positive modeling during mealtimes.

Consistent with previous research, parents reported feeding strategies such as placing food on children's plates, telling children to eat, denying children food, and threatening to take away food and nonfood privileges (Baughcum, Burklow, Deeks, Powers, & Whitaker, 1998; Birch et al., 2001; Contreras & Horodyski, 2010). Sherry et al. (2004) noted that parents used controlling feeding practices such as pressuring children to eat or using bribes or rewards with food such as dessert in response to children's food refusal and picky eating. We observed controlling feeding practices in our study as well. Controlling feeding practices are associated with children's consumption of energy-dense food and drink and with children's reduced ability to recognize their own bodily cues for hunger and satiety (Bante, Elliott, Harrod, & Haire-Joshu, 2008; Campbell et al., 2006; Sellers, Russo, Baker, & Dennison, 2005; Tysoe & Wilson, 2010). Therefore, it is important for Extension educators to provide parents with information on effective feeding strategies and to teach about self-regulated eating. One example is Satter's division of responsibility in feeding, where children choose the quantity of food they consume (Satter, 2005).

Our second research question concerned parental perceptions about mealtime context, meaning, and challenges. Parents reported that family mealtimes were opportunities for relationship building. They described values related to family meals, such as family bonding and communication. Parents believed family meals provided an opportunity for family members to "catch up" on one another's days. Extension professionals can capitalize on the value parents place on family mealtimes in providing resources such as nutrition and meal preparation workshops for families or conveying information about family mealtimes through outreach media.

Parents reported barriers and challenges to successful family mealtimes, including busy schedules and children's picky eating habits. Contreras and Horodyski (2010) identified similar mealtime challenges in low-income families. Parents also wanted more help in preparing healthful meals. Extension programs could provide healthful mealtime ideas that are easy and quick to prepare.

Findings from our observation and interview data provided converging evidence about socialization processes during family mealtimes. These issues are important to understand when designing programs that address parents' values, goals, and challenges. For example, a workshop in which families cook, eat, interact, and clean up together and learn about time-saving and healthful meal ideas would help parents address the challenges of time and nutrition while honoring the value of family interaction. Engaging fathers through programs such as weGrill, which incorporates nutrition education with grilling for fathers and youths, could encourage fathers to become more involved in the mealtime process and share some of the burden with mothers (Bates et al., 2017). Incorporating mealtime activities such as inviting each family member to share a high point and a challenge from the day or asking children to share a story during dinner could be mealtime conversation ideas that promote family bonding and communication as well as child language and literacy development. Information on mealtime modeling, feeding strategies, cost- and time-efficient healthful meal preparation, and mealtime conversation ideas also could be disseminated to parents via Extension resources such as articles, infographics, blogs, and social media.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

Our study was conducted with a primarily White sample in a midwestern state, which limits the understanding of family mealtimes to one ethnic group within a specific area in the country. However, the sample accurately reflected the ethnic diversity of the state. There was some diversity in parent education levels, parent

employment statuses, family incomes, and children's school types. Researchers conducting future studies should ensure greater sample and regional diversity.

Selection bias and social desirability also may threaten validity in our study. Families self-selected to be in the study and might already have valued family meals and had them frequently. Social desirability was partially addressed by recording two mealtimes for the first few families to ensure the behaviors were consistent across sessions.

Our study provides insight into parents' approaches to conducting family mealtimes, perceptions of mealtimes and challenges, and desired changes. The findings are important for researchers seeking to advance work in the area of family mealtimes and youth dietary behaviors and for Extension practitioners working with families and parents.

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