

10 Ways Teens Benefit From Family Dinners

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Sept. 16, 2005 -- Eating dinner as a family can help kids long after the meal is over, a new study shows.

The report comes from The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). It's based on national phone survey of 1,000 teens and 829 parents of teens.

Teens who had frequent family dinners fared better than those that rarely ate with their families, the survey shows.

10 Benefits of Family Dinners

The survey notes 10 positive trends for teens who eat dinner often with their families:

- Less likely to smoke cigarettes
- Less likely to drink alcohol
- Less likely to try marijuana
- Less likely to have friends who use illicit drugs
- Less likely to have friends who abuse prescription drugs
- More likely to get mostly A's and B's at school
- More likely to say they would confide in one or both parents about a serious problem
- More likely to report that their parents are very proud of them
- More likely to report lower levels of stress and tension at home
- More likely to talk to their families during dinner and have the TV off during the meal

Those findings come from comparing teens who have five or more family dinners per week with those who have three or fewer weekly family dinners.

Weight, Nutrition Perks

Family dinners have also been linked to healthier eating and fewer weight problems, as Harvard Medical School's Elsie Taveras, MD, PhD, told WebMD in May.

Taveras' study on family dinners appeared in May's issue of *Obesity Research*.

Younger kids who usually ate dinner with their families were less likely to be overweight than children who had fewer family dinners, Taveras found. But the advantage disappeared in the teen years, when teens often skipped family dinners.

There is a need to find ways to get older teens back to the family dinner table, Taveras' team noted. The new CASA survey supports that idea.

Putting Family Engagement on the Menu

Family dinners get a five-star review from CASA Chairman and President Joseph Califano Jr.

"One of the simplest and most effective ways for parents to be engaged in their teens' lives is by having frequent family dinners," Califano says.

He notes that while children from any family can have substance abuse issues, "one factor that does more to reduce teens' substance abuse risk than almost any other is parental engagement."

Finding the Time

Both teens and parents polled by CASA expressed a desire for more family dinners.

"These findings indicate that families face barriers -- other than lack of willingness -- to gathering around the dinner table," the report says. "These barriers may include late work hours, after-school activities, and long commutes."

Since family dinners are so important, families should work to identify and overcome those obstacles, CASA suggests.

CASA's survey was sponsored by TV Land and Nick at Nite's Family Table.

SOURCES: The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University: "The Importance of Family Dinners. WebMD Medical News: "Eat as a Family, Lose Weight." "Eat as a Family, Lose Weight." News release, The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

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