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The Family Dinner Table: Implications for Children's Health and Wellbeing

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MATERIALS

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This brief summarizes a longer Social Policy Report

Reclaiming the Family Table: Mealtimes and Child Health and Wellbeing

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Why Does This Matter?

The average family meal lasts barely 20 minutes, but few other settings in family life have such potential to influence children's behavior and development. Sharing a meal regularly, research suggests, can boost children's health and wellbeing, reducing the likelihood that they'll become obese or use drugs, and increase the chances that they'll do well in school.

Individuals at all levels—from federal, state, and local governments to businesses, the community, and parents—can take steps to educate families about the benefits of family mealtimes for children and adolescents.

Policy Implications

To help create successful strategies for mealtime:

- **The federal government** should build on local initiatives that have launched marketing campaigns promoting the many benefits of healthy family mealtimes. The Child Nutrition Act and Women, Infants and Children initiatives offer opportunities for educating families in this regard.
- **State and local governments** should work with their health departments to develop action plans to reduce food insecurity and promote healthy mealtimes in underserved families.
- **Cities & communities** should support zoning laws, low-interest loan programs, and food labeling programs that allow families to make healthy food choices in all neighborhoods. Communities also should launch public information campaigns to promote the importance of family mealtime and work with schools to promote the idea of at least one night a week when families eat together.
- **The food advertising and marketing industry** should support Federal Trade Commission recommendations to make nutritious foods more widely available to children and teens. These industries also should partner with communities to develop effective public service announcements to promote the benefits of shared family mealtimes.
- **Families** also have a role: They should set aside regular times for shared meals and set limits on activities that interfere with mealtimes, such as watching television.

What the Research Says

Research on family mealtimes tells us that:

- Regular mealtimes have a protective effect on children. Teens who eat five or more meals a week with their families are less likely to smoke cigarettes or marijuana and to abuse alcohol.
- Children who take part in regular family mealtimes have more vocabulary growth and academic achievement than those who don't.
- Frequently shared mealtimes protect against obesity in children and eating disorders in preteens.
- In families with young children, eating together means fewer behavior problems.
- While it's unclear exactly how frequent family mealtimes improve children's health outcomes, families that regularly dine with their teens tend to eat more fruits and vegetables. Meals prepared at home also tend to be lower in calories and fat than restaurant meals.
- Various studies have characterized three to five meals a week as regular, but no magic number ensures healthy outcomes.
- Watching TV while eating disrupts mealtime patterns that may support children's health and has been linked to obesity in children.

Facts at a Glance

- On average, about 50 percent of American families say they eat together three to five times a week, with younger children participating in family mealtimes more regularly than older children and poorer families reporting less frequent family mealtimes.
- Most family meals last, on average, 18 to 20 minutes.
- Families are busy juggling the needs of work, school, exercise, and after-school activities. When families have to make an effort to create healthy meals, they are likely to choose convenience, which, because it is often less healthy, is not always best for children.
- Almost half (46%) of families have a TV in the area where they eat.
- Over the past 25 years, the percent of American food dollars spent on foods away from home has grown from approximately 26% to over 40%; 93% of kids' meals are too high in calories for children.
- Food advertising is the second-largest advertising industry in the United States. In 2006, the food and beverage industry spent $1.6 billion marketing to children and teens. Of this, $870 million was spent on ads geared to children under 12.

This brief summarizes a longer *Social Policy Report*, "Reclaiming the Family Table: Mealtimes and Child Health and Wellbeing," by **Barbara H. Fiese**, Professor and Director of the Family Resiliency Center in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and **Marlene Schwartz**, Deputy Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University