



Assessing the relationship between family mealtime communication and adolescent emotional well-being using the experience sampling method



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A B S T R A C T

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While most prior research has focused on the frequency of family meals the issue of which elements of family mealtime are most salient for adolescents' well-being has remained overlooked. The current study used the experience sampling method, a unique form of time diary, and survey data drawn from the 500 Family Study ($N = 237$ adolescents with 8122 observations) to examine the association between family mealtime communication and teens' emotional well-being. Results showed that in approximately half of the time spent on family meals (3 h per week on average) adolescents reported talking to their parents. Hierarchical linear model analyses revealed that controlling for the quality of family relationships family mealtime communication was significantly associated with higher positive affect and engagement and with lower negative affect and stress. Findings suggest that family meals constitute an important site for communication between teens and parents that is beneficial to adolescents' emotional well-being.

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Family meals have been heralded in both scholarly research and the popular press as an important contributor to youth development. Studies show that the frequency of family meals is positively associated with a myriad of health and well-being outcomes. Adolescents who frequently eat meals with their family are healthier (Fulkerson, Kubik, Story, Lytle, & Arcan, 2009; Hammons & Fiese, 2011), less likely to have eating disorders (Hammons & Fiese, 2011; Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, Fulkerson, Story, & Larson, 2008), engage in risky behaviors such as smoking, drinking alcohol, or using drugs (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; Franko, Thompson, Affenito, Barton, & Striegel-Moore, 2008; Fulkerson, Story, et al., 2006; Musick & Meier, 2012; National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, CASA, 2010; Sen, 2010), and have higher school achievement (CASA, 2010; Eisenberg et al., 2004).

Research further shows that family meals are beneficial to adolescents' psychosocial adjustment. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) Musick and Meier (2012) reported that frequent family dinners are related to a reduction in depressive symptoms. A similar pattern was observed among adolescents who participated in the Eating Among Teens (EAT) Project (Eisenberg et al., 2004). The frequency of family meals was also found to be related to higher social competence (Fulkerson, Story, et al., 2006) and lower perceived stress (Franko et al., 2008). This study focuses on the association between family mealtime and teens' emotional well-being.

The burgeoning literature on family meals has proposed several mechanisms by which family meals promote youth health and well-being. Family meals, it is argued, constitute an important ritual and a major site for socialization (Fiese & Schwartz,

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2008; Fiese et al., 2002; Larson, Branscomb, & Wiley, 2006). Gathering at the table gives teens and their parents the opportunity to converse, express their feelings, and provide support to each other, which is important for reinforcing the social bonds between them and building a sense of family togetherness (Fiese et al., 2002; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). Ochs and Shohet (2006) further contended that family meals serve a moral function because “they are pervaded by talk oriented toward reinforcing what is right and wrong about both the family and outsiders” (p. 42). Hence by eating meals together, parents can convey key values to their children (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006; Shaw, 2008). Family meals also facilitate parental monitoring and supervision (Fiese et al., 2006; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003; Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Sen, 2010). Through conversations at the dinner table parents learn about their children’s daily activities and whereabouts. According to findings from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse study nearly 80% of the parents interviewed mentioned that family meals gave them the opportunity to learn more about what was going on in their teens’ lives (CASA, 2010).

Overall, these studies suggest that one of the most important aspects of family meals is communication between teens and parents (Fiese et al., 2006; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Larson et al., 2006; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). Research shows that mealtime communication is associated with lower emotional distress (Fiese et al., 2006) and a reduced risk of overweight among teens (Jacobs & Fiese, 2007). Families, however, vary considerably in the extent to which they directly interact during mealtime (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). One major source of distraction during family meals is television, which is considered an important inhibitor of social interactions (Feldman, Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2007; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Jordan, Hershey, McDivitt, & Heitzler, 2006).

In other words, it is not so much the family meal per se that is important for teens’ well-being but what happens between family members when they gather to share a meal. This important aspect of the family meal, however, has been relatively overlooked in current research (Neumark-Sztainer, Larson, Fulkerson, Eisenberg, & Story, 2010). The major goal of the present study is to fill in this gap in the literature by focusing on family mealtime communication. Musick and Meier (2012) noted that “future work needs to go further in assessing which elements of mealtime are most salient, looking beyond how often families eat together.” To respond to this call, this study examined the frequency of family mealtime communication and assessed its relationship with adolescents’ emotional well-being. Specifically, it evaluated (1) what proportion of family mealtime is spent on direct communication between adolescents and their parents, and (2) how adolescents feel when they communicate with their parents during mealtime. On the basis of the literature suggesting that family meals constitute an important site for familial social interactions, I hypothesized that family mealtime communication would be associated with increased emotional well-being among teens.

Measuring family meals and family mealtime communication

Most of the research conducted on family mealtime has examined the number of days per week that children eat with their family, with at least five meals per week considered to be the optimal cut-off point for healthy outcomes (CASA, 2010; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). Studies, however, differ in the way they define a family meal in terms of the people present and whether it refers to a specific meal, typically dinner, or not. For example, in the Eating Among Teens (EAT) project, respondents were asked about the number of times a week all, or most, of the family in their house ate a meal together without specifying who was present (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Musick and Meier’s (2012) study used a more specific measure that asked whether respondents ate five or more evening meals a week with at least one of their parents. They found that 60% of the adolescents in their sample fit this category. A similar number was reported by Sen using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) who indicated that 57% of adolescent girls and nearly 64% of adolescent boys ate dinner with their family at least 5 days a week, without specifying who was present during the meal.

Other studies are based on time diaries and calculate the number of minutes a day (or hours per week) adolescents eat with their family. Using the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), Wight, Price, Bianchi, and Hunt (2009) calculated that a third of the teens ate a meal with their family for at least 20 min a day between 4 pm and 9 pm. Crouter, Head, McHale, and Tucker (2004) employed a more inclusive measure of family meal and found that teens spent almost 2 h a week eating meals with both of their parents and siblings present.

Most of these studies focus on the frequency of family meals but they do not account for what teens and their parents do besides eating when they share a meal. The current study uses a different methodology, the experience sampling method (ESM), to estimate not only the frequency of family meals but also the extent of family mealtime communication. The ESM is a form of time diary that collects information *in situ* about respondents’ activities, companionships, and emotional states (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007). The ESM has several advantages. First, it makes it possible to calculate accurate estimates of the overall amount of time adolescents spend eating meals with their parents under different family constellations (i.e., with the mother only, with the father only, and with both parents present) and is not limited to dinner time. As Musick and Meier (2012) pointed out, the benefits of shared meals may not be restricted to the “evening meal.” Second, because the ESM collected data on both primary and secondary activities it can be used to learn about what other activities adolescents engage in besides consuming food when they eat meals together with their family. The ESM thus allows estimating how much time adolescents spend communicating with their parents during family mealtime.

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