

Family Dinner Linked to Better Grades for Teens

Pastor Eddie Idefonso

Survey Finds Regular Meal Time Yields Additional Benefits

SUMMIT, N.J., Sept. 13, 2005 — A regular family dinner may yield some surprising benefits for teens, a new study finds.

According to a new Columbia University survey, teenagers who eat with their families at least five times a week are more likely to get better grades in school and much less likely to have substance abuse problems.

As hard as it may be for many teenagers to imagine, there was a time when the family dinner was a kind of ritual in most homes and where family values were ingrained.

Today, though, only about half of American teenagers say they have regular family dinners, as the Boak family of Summit does. "We try to talk about daily events," said Tom Boak. "What's happened at school, what's happened at soccer, homework."

The survey suggests that family time may be more important to children than many parents realize.

It found teens having family dinners five or more times a week were 42 percent less likely to drink alcohol, 59 percent less likely to smoke cigarettes, and 66 percent less likely to try marijuana.

"At a time when kids are under a lot of stress for a lot of different reasons, having that regular mealtime that they can count on, that their parents are there for support — that can be very helpful," said David Elkind, a professor of child development at Tufts University in Massachusetts.

The survey also found that frequent family dinners were associated with better school performance, with teens 40 percent more likely to get A's and B's. The results are consistent with a growing body of research. A Harvard University study found that family dinners were the most important family events in helping children develop language skills.

Hard to Find the Time

But for many families, that evening meal together can be a scheduling nightmare. With more parents today working later and more children in after-school programs — soccer practices, ballet rehearsals, basketball games, track meets, piano lessons and scout meetings — finding the time has become increasingly more difficult.