Where’s the Magic in Family Dinner?
By LISA DAMOUR

Like many families, we strive to eat dinner together as often as possible. And when my husband and I meet our tween and her younger sister at the table, we sometimes have worthwhile conversations or manage to crack each other up. But, at least as often, dinner devolves into a failing effort to find out what happened at school or a nag-fest over mealtime manners. After an especially short or harried supper, I can find myself wondering how the family gathering that just transpired could possibly help to raise my daughters’ grades, improve their psychological well-being or lower their risk of substance abuse.
I’m not the first to question whether family dinners are truly responsible for the many happy results to which they are famously linked. If we zoom out from the tight focus on the evening meal, we can see bigger picture factors that, in their own right, support positive outcomes for children while also helping families get to the dinner table. For example, one study of adolescents found that living in an economically secure home with both biological parents accounted for some, but not all, of the benefits that are typically chalked up to family meals.
Still, eating together seems to have effects that go beyond the advantages of having financial means or married parents. So what accounts for the magic of the evening meal, especially when sparkling banter is a fickle dinner guest in most homes? Reflecting on the families I’ve worked with in my practice, I’ve come to suspect that regular meals serve as an easily measured proxy for one of the longest-standing and sturdiest determinants of adolescent well-being: authoritative parenting.
In the early 1970s, the psychologist Diana Baumrind identified two essential components of parenting: structure and warmth. Authoritative parents bring both. They hold high standards for behavior while being lovingly engaged with their children. Decades of research have documented that teenagers raised by authoritative parents are the ones most likely to do well at school, enjoy abundant psychological health and stay out of trouble. In contrast, adolescents with authoritarian parents (high on structure, low on warmth), indulgent parents (low on structure, high on warmth) or neglectful parents (low on both) don’t fare nearly so well.
What does this have to do with dinner? Getting adolescents to the table requires a surprising amount of structure; it’s not easy to hold the expectation that our teenagers will join us even for a quick bite. If it were, we wouldn’t have a recent report showing a decline in adolescents eating dinner with their parents despite the many loud champions of the family meal. Securing a teenager’s mealtime presence serves up further opportunities for authoritative structure. Adolescents can prepare or clean up the spread, or field questions about their summer employment plans. Luckily, the rewards of authoritative parenting do not require an enthusiastic teenage response.

Simultaneously, getting parents to the supper table presumes a degree of warmth. To make a priority of spending mealtimes with our children, we must manage our own commitments and slay the scheduling dragons that keep us from family dinner. Then there’s the caring gesture of putting a meal together and the fact that we are setting the table for the possibility of enjoying one another’s company. In short, to find a teenager and at least one parent sharing a regular meal suggests the presence of authoritative parenting and all the good that goes with it.

Viewing dinner through Dr. Baumrind’s lens helps me fret less about our rushed or unhappy meals. Simply making it to supper together may be a win unto itself. And focusing on the broad factors of structure and warmth reminds me that, as with many aspects of family life, there are lots of ways to get it right. If a family’s schedule means that dinner can’t happen, maybe breakfast can. Indeed, planned meals are just one of many routine interactions that can weave structure and warmth into the fabric of family life.

Of course rigidly observing mealtimes, or any other ritual, cannot guarantee that our adolescents will go on to lead contented and fulfilling lives. But for parents who are looking to communicate high expectations and an interest in their children, aiming to dine together isn’t a bad place to start. Shared meals are likely to be both a cause and a consequence of a sustaining family life. Either way, let’s eat.

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