

Scientist: Public policy should promote family mealtimes

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In a new report, University of Illinois professor Barbara H. Fiese urges local, state, and federal governments, businesses, and community leaders to promote family mealtimes as a matter of public policy.

"There are few things parents can do that are as effective in protecting their families as taking 18 to 20 minutes to eat together and talk with each other three to five times a week," said Fiese, a U of I professor of human development and family studies and the director of the U of I's Family Resiliency Center.

Research indicates the following benefits of family mealtimes:

- Teens who eat five or more meals a week with their families are less likely to smoke cigarettes and marijuana and to abuse alcohol.
- [Children](#) who take part in regular family mealtimes have greater vocabulary growth and higher academic achievement.
- Frequently shared mealtimes protect against [obesity](#) in children and eating disorders in preteens and adolescents.
- For young children, family mealtimes mean fewer behavior problems.

- Teens who dine regularly with their families tend to eat more fruits and [vegetables](#).
- Meals prepared at home tend to be lower in calories and fat than restaurant fare.

"Most people don't think of family mealtimes as a policy issue, they think of them as private events. But sometimes policy makers work against the best interests of families," she noted.

According to Fiese, many decisions made at the local, state, and federal level affect families' ability to consume healthy foods. In our cities' poorer neighborhoods, residents are far more likely to find a convenience store stocked with [snack foods](#) than a grocery store that sells fresh produce and more healthful foods, she said.

"These [food](#) deserts exist even in Champaign-Urbana, which is located on some of the richest soil in the country. When families have to make an effort to create healthy meals, they're likely to choose convenience foods," she said.

Inaccessibility of nutritious foods and lack of resources combine in low-income areas to create food insecurity. "The ability to find and afford healthy foods is compromised," said Fiese.

She urged cities and communities to support zoning laws, low-interest loan programs, and food labeling programs that allow families to make healthful food choices in all neighborhoods. Communities could also launch campaigns to stress the importance of family mealtimes and work with schools to promote the idea that families should eat together at least once a week.

Fiese would also like to see policy makers tackle food marketing to

children. In 2006, the food and beverage industry spent \$1.6 billion advertising to children and teens. Of that amount, \$870 million was spent on ads geared to children under 12, Fiese said.

"Young children are easy targets for these marketers' messages, especially when the pitch is delivered by a cartoon character or another media personality they trust. These ads create a demand for unhealthy foods, and parents often feel ill-equipped to say no," she said.

According to Fiese, in the past 25 years the percentage of food dollars spent away from home has grown from approximately 26 percent to over 40 percent. And 93 percent of kid's meals are too high in calories for children, she said.

"But it's a battle because even two-year-olds can recognize the symbols for fast-food restaurants and lobby their parents for items they've seen advertised," she noted.

She asks the food advertising industry to support the recommendations of the Federal Trade Commission that would make nutritious foods more widely available to children and teens. She'd also like to see industry partner with communities to develop effective public service announcements that promote shared family mealtimes.

"The federal government could also use the school lunch program and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program to better advantage. Although there have been many changes in the contents of food packages, they provide no information that promotes family mealtimes as a way to improve nutrition and reduce stress in families," she said.

Finally, Fiese said that parents must make the effort to set aside regular times for shared meals and set limits on activities--such as watching television and using cell phones for conversation and texting--that

interfere with family interaction.

"Sadly, almost 46 percent of families have a television in their kitchen or dining room. Research shows that this kind of multitasking during meals makes people more likely to eat food that's high in sugar and fat and less likely to consume fruits and vegetables. Shared mealtimes aren't just about food, they're about helping family members relax," she said.

Fiese is confident that a policy push can make a difference. "Because of the advocacy of behavioral and social scientists, people have learned to wear seat belts and bike helmets for their own protection. Now it's time for policy makers to promote family mealtimes as a proven way of protecting your family's health and well-being," she said.

More information: These recommendations appeared in volume 22, issue 4, of *Social Policy Report*, a publication of the Society for Research in Child Development.

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