

Parents' work influences how often family meals are eaten outside of home

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According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Americans are spending about half their food budget in restaurants. As it is widely known, food prepared away from home, as compared to food prepared at home, is often higher in calories, saturated fat, and sodium. With children's dietary quality at risk, a study in the May/June 2011 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* explores the influence of parental styles and work schedules on children's use of and time spent in fast-food and full-service restaurants.

Investigators from the Department of Sociology, Texas A&M University interviewed parents and children (ages 9-11 and 13-15) from 312 families in Houston, TX. Interview questions measured parental [work schedules](#), parenting style, family meal ritual perceptions, and time children spent in an automobile with their parents. Findings from this study reveal that factors related to more time spent in [fast-food](#) and full-service restaurants included both parents having standard work schedules, fathers' use of these types of restaurants, and children's time spent in the family automobile.

A striking finding in the present study is the strong association between the use of and time spent in both fast-food and full-service restaurants by children and use of and time in restaurants by their fathers. Dr. Alex McIntosh, PhD, Professor at Texas A&M University, states, "Since dietary behaviors, like relying on [food](#) away from home and eating fast food, have been shown to track from childhood through adolescence into young adulthood, fathers should be encouraged to model healthful food

choices when they obtain food and to eat with children at home. After all, fathers who believe that dinner is an important family ritual reduce children's use of fast food; this perception should also be encouraged among fathers."

This study documents the importance of identifying determinants that increase the use of restaurants in families' dining habits. As found in this study, eating out more often can be caused by something as common as both parents working a "9 to 5 job." The researchers emphasize that the "dietary quality of children is influenced by the manner in which parents interact with their children (parenting style), time available for family meals, and the role restaurants play in their lives."

More information: The article is "Determinants of Children's Use of and Time Spent in Fast-food and Full-service Restaurants" by Alex McIntosh, PhD et al. It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 43, Issue 3 (May/June 2011)

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