

Do family meals really make a difference for child academics or behavior?

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(Medical Xpress)—A shared meal has consistently been valued for its social and health benefits—it's recognized as a door to academic excellence and as the ceremonial event that helps cement family relationships, no matter how you define "family." However, a new study co-authored by Boston University School of Social Work Assistant Professor Daniel P. Miller has found that the perceived benefits may not be as strong as once thought.

Despite popular wisdom and findings from much previous research that suggests the beneficial impact of family mealtime, a [rigorous analysis](#) of 21,400 children, ages five to 15, brings a new argument to the table: When researchers controlled for a host of confounding factors, they didn't find any relationship between [family meals](#) and child [academic outcomes](#) or behavior.

"We find no relationship between family breakfasts or family dinners and any child outcomes – reading, math and science scores, or behavior problems," says Miller.

"That didn't change according to the age of the kids or even how we measured family meals: whether it was three meals a week, five meals a week or nine meals a week didn't seem to matter."

The longitudinal study, to appear in the journal [Child Development](#), was co-authored by researchers at Columbia University and New York University, and draws upon rich data from a nationally representative

sample of U.S. children who entered kindergarten in 1998 and were tracked through eighth grade. Using a fixed effects approach, the study controlled for a variety of factors such as parental employment, television-watching, the quality of school facilities, the years of experience the children's teachers had, and other variables that could potentially affect child outcomes.

In the end, the researchers were surprised to find the effects of family meals on test scores and behavioral problems were either small or "effectively zero."

"We would never suggest that families should not eat meals together," Miller says, "the family meal table is an important place for parents and children to interact and communicate. However, it may be that the nature and extent of the influence of family dinners and breakfasts may be different than previously understood."

"Families that believe in the importance of eating together might also do lots of other things they feel are good for their kids, like go to the library or be more invested in picking the right schools," says Miller. "But if you just look at the frequency of family meals, that may seem to be causing positive results."

The study is part of a growing body of literature questioning the nature and extent of the impact of family meals. Future research is necessary to determine whether family meals are related to different outcomes or might impact academics or behavior for older children.

More information: DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01825.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01825.x)

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