

Eating together as a family helps children feel better, physically and mentally

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Children who routinely eat their meals together with their family are more likely to experience long-term physical and mental health benefits, a new Canadian study shows.

Université de Montréal doctoral student Marie-Josée Harbec and her supervisor, psychoeducation professor Linda Pagani, made the finding after following a cohort of Quebec children born between 1997 and 1998.

The study is published today in the *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*.

"There is a handful of research suggesting positive links between eating family meals together frequently and child and adolescent health," Pagani said. "In the past, researchers were unclear on whether families that ate together were simply healthier to begin with. And measuring how often families eat together and how children are doing at that very moment may not capture the complexity of the environmental experience."

The study looked at children who had been followed by researchers since they were 5 months old as part of the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development. At age 6, their parents started reporting on whether or not they had family meals together. At age 10, parents, teachers and the children themselves provided information on the children's lifestyle habits and their psycho-social well-being.

"We decided to look at the long-term influence of sharing meals as an early childhood family environment experience in a sample of children born the same year," Pagani said, "and we followed-up regularly as they grew up. Using a birth cohort, this study examines the prospective associations between the environmental quality of the family meal experience at age 6 and child well-being at age 10."

When the family meal environment quality was better at age 6, higher levels of general fitness and lower levels of soft-drink consumption were observed at age 10. These children also seemed to have more social

skills, as they were less likely to self-report being physical aggressive, oppositional or delinquent at age 10.

"Because we had a lot of information about the children before age 6 - such as their temperament and cognitive abilities, their mother's education and psychological characteristics, and prior family configuration and functioning - we were able to eliminate any pre-existing conditions of the children or families that could throw a different light on our results," said Harbec. "It was really ideal as a situation."

Added Pagani: "The presence of parents during mealtimes likely provides young children with firsthand social interaction, discussions of social issues and day-to-day concerns, and vicarious learning of prosocial interactions in a familiar and emotionally secure setting. Experiencing positive forms of communication may likely help the child engage in better communication skills with people outside of the family unit. Our findings suggest that family meals are not solely markers of home environment quality, but are also easy targets for parent education about improving children's well-being."

"From a population-health perspective, our findings suggest that family meals have long-term influences on [children's](#) physical and mental well-being," said Harbec.

At a time when fewer families in Western countries are having meals together, it would be especially opportune now for psycho-social workers to encourage the practice at home - indeed, even make it a priority, the researchers believe. And [family meals](#) could be touted as advantageous in public-information campaigns that aim to optimize [child development](#).

More information: Marie-Josée Harbec et al, Associations Between

Early Family Meal Environment Quality and Later Well-Being in School-Age Children, *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* (2017).
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