

Ensuring healthy family mealtimes is important – and complicated

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Mealtimes are a central aspect of family life, affecting the health and wellbeing of both children and adults. Although the benefits of healthy mealtimes are straightforward, helping all families realize those benefits is quite complicated, new research from University of Illinois shows.

The study highlights ways in which some solutions—such as an exclusive focus on improving [food access](#) or on improving mealtime preparation and organization skills—may be less effective if done in isolation, says Allen Barton, assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I and lead author on the study.

"Family mealtimes are probably one of the most fundamental and frequent tasks that families engage in. If we are going to improve the health of children and families, effectively addressing family mealtimes will require some attention," he notes. "But in thinking about this issue we need to avoid overly simplistic answers and consider more holistic approaches to solutions."

Barton says previous studies on family mealtimes have tended to focus on either sociological factors (such as community food access and [food security](#)) or psychological factors (such as individual behaviors around mealtime activities) but the new study shows both dimensions are closely linked in families.

Barton and co-authors Brenda Koester, Elinor Fujimoto, and Barbara Fiese, researchers at U of I's Family Resiliency Center, studied more than 500 families with elementary school-aged children throughout the state of Illinois. Family members responded to a host of questions on food security, food planning and preparation, and mealtime organization. The researchers analyzed the data for patterns and identified three distinct groups, or family profiles.

The first profile, which comprised 55% of the sample, was characterized as food secure and having high levels of household organization. The families in this group reported the lowest levels of food insecurity and household chaos among the three profiles, as well as the highest levels of efficacy in preparing food, Barton says.

The second profile was at the opposite end of the spectrum and included 27% of the sample.

"This group not only reports they are food insecure, but they also report the lowest levels of confidence in preparing and planning meals and most difficulty in daily structure and routine in the home," Barton notes.

The third profile group, which comprised 18% of the sample, had food security levels that ranged between the other two groups, but they reported levels of meal planning efficacy and household chaos similar to families in the food secure group.

That food insecurity is co-occurring with other family risk patterns means efforts to promote healthy family mealtimes should address multiple aspects, Barton says.

"We need to ensure families have access to healthy food. But we also need to make sure individuals within the family feel competent to prepare and plan meals, and the day-to-day organization at home has some stability and routine," he states.

The researchers also identified specific differences among the groups in food preparation strategies and mealtime behaviors. In particular, families in the second profile (those with very low food security and more difficulty organizing daily tasks) reported fewer weekly meals together, higher technology use during meals, and greater usage of away-from-home food preparation strategies than families in the other groups. All these behaviors correlate with less healthy food consumption and outcomes, Barton says.

While the study found clear differences, there were also some similarities among the three groups. All of the families were equally likely to shop for food in a variety of stores, including grocery stores,

discount stores, and big box stores. The researchers also found general agreement in most common challenges among families concerning household meals, including how to deal with picky eaters and wanting easy menu ideas.

"The findings from this study are important in helping us develop practical resources that families can use to address challenges they face in providing healthy meals and regular family mealtimes," Koester notes.

The research also provides information for [policy makers](#) to address structural issues around access to food, as well as suggestions for changes within the home.

"We need to understand risk is multifaceted, so we should avoid myopic answers and solutions. We need to address food insecurity. We also need to help individuals increase their confidence in preparing meals as well as building routines, predictability, and organization into life in the home," Barton states.

For families, Barton emphasizes the importance of prioritizing [family mealtimes](#). "These mundane aspects of family life that may seem trivial are really formative. Think about one aspect that you want to improve in this area—whether it's having more healthy meals, less screen usage during meals, learning about different [food](#) banks, or just having more meals together during the week—and then develop a strategy to go about doing it. There are some tremendous resources, including ones created by the researchers and educators at the University of Illinois, available to help you and your [family](#)."

More information: Allen W. Barton et al. The complexities of family mealtimes in the 21st century: A latent profile analysis, *Appetite* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2020.105009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.105009)

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