

# Rising cost of living puts spotlight on family meals

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Australian parents face similar barriers to delivering regular and nutritious meals as families did in the 1990s, amid increasing cost of living and time pressures that have been ignored for thirty years,

according to new research.

Two new studies led by Dr. Georgia Middleton at Flinders University's Caring Futures Institute have examined the similarities and differences in [family](#) experiences when it comes to preparing sit-down meals across two periods in South Australia: the 1990s and 2020.

The research paper titled "The family meal, a ritual frozen in time; an Australian grounded theory study" is published in [Health Promotion International](#). The second study, "Barriers and enablers to the family meal across time; a grounded theory study comparing South Australian parents' perspectives," is published in [Appetite](#).

In both studies, 22 parents in 2020 were interviewed about their experiences with [family meals](#) when balancing time commitments, costs, and changing food preferences among children. Their responses were then compared to those provided by 32 parents in the 1990s.

The results show that families continue to place significant social value on sharing meals but parents across generations have less time and money available to produce family meals due to increased [food prices](#) and work commitments.

Interestingly, parents prepared separate meals to accommodate their children's food preferences across both generations, so this trend isn't catering to a new generation of children.

The researchers say that future support for time-poor families could include flexible workplace policies, nutritious and affordable family-friendly convenience meals, or school or workplace programs that provide meals to take home and share.

The research also shows that modern parents are either more willing to

compromise their own meals to only prepare one option or are more insistent that their children eat what is served. This is in contrast to the 1990s, when children and adults often enjoyed different meals.

Dr. Georgia Middleton says many of the barriers encountered by families in the 1990s have persisted today because [support systems](#) were never put in place, so responsibility for addressing these barriers should not be placed solely on parents' shoulders.

"These new findings indicate that parents have faced similar challenges for decades and they're still not being adequately supported to deliver [regular family meals](#)," she says.

"We have been told that to achieve the benefits of family meals, we must follow an idealistic, age-old formula: all [family members](#) at the table, happily sharing a home-cooked meal and chatting without distractions. But modern reality includes time-poor families, fussy eaters, siblings at odds and stress about what meals to cook—not to mention cost-of-living pressures. This combination can make achieving family meals difficult, if not impossible, for many families."

Scheduling and flexibility, children's disruptions and independence, privileges required to have family meals and motivation and commitment to the family meal were identified as persistent enablers and barriers across time by Dr. Middleton and the authors of the research.

"Recognizing that these factors present as either barriers or enablers to the family meal provides us with opportunities to shift barriers into opportunities that support families to have regular, meaningful family meals," says Dr. Middleton.

The 2020 interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in

South Australia.

Families' "normal" meal practices were the focus of the interviews; however, parents in the 2020 sample did describe some changes to shopping practices, family meal frequency and environment resulting from the pandemic and subsequent restrictions.

"Conducting interviews amid this pandemic in 2020 may have influenced participants' experiences and perspectives of the family meal but the changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated how barriers and enablers can be influenced and modified to make family meals more achievable."

Dr. Middleton is currently undertaking an International Fellowship in Vancouver, Canada as part of her research exploring family meal experiences across countries.

**More information:** Georgia Middleton et al, The family meal, a ritual frozen in time; an Australian grounded theory study, *Health Promotion International* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/heapro/daad124](https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daad124)

Georgia Middleton et al, Barriers and enablers to the family meal across time; a grounded theory study comparing South Australian parents' perspectives, *Appetite* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2023.107091](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.107091)

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