

The family that eats together stays together

Fact: Families spend less time together than they did twenty-five years ago. In an era of unprecedented time-saving devices, we are busier than ever and less connected to one another. This is particularly true in families. In ***Bowling Alone***, researcher Robert Putman comments on 40 years of tracking the American family. Forty years of observing and noting the changes in the family. His conclusion—substantial declines in quality time among family members; dramatic declines in social and civic participation. In fact, the title of his book comes from data showing that while Americans are bowling more, league participation has dropped.

So why an article on eating together? Simple. Most families do not eat together. In fact, Putman has observed a one-third decline in family dinners; despite the fact that most of the families report that they place a high value on family meals. One study, looking at teen behavior, found a strong link between regular family meals and a number of positive outcomes: academic success, psychological adjustment, lower rate of drug and alcohol use, and risk of suicide.

Another study, of children ages 3-12, found that time spent eating at home was a better predictor of academic success and emotional adjustment than any of the following activities: school, homework, athletics, arts and religious participation.

Be honest, for how many of you do family meals involve fast food eaten in the van between activities? Or, for how many do family meals happen in front of the TV.

What accounts for this decline in families eating together? Data seems to indicate that two issues are involved. The first is increased working hours for parents. The second is even more insidious—overscheduled children and disconnected families. Frantic families have become the norm. Kids are involved in soccer, karate, piano, scouts, gymnastics, tutoring and religious youth activities. Family life now revolves around children's activities. A University of Michigan study shows that, in the last few years, children have lost an average of twelve hours a week in free time. Outdoor activity time has dropped

nearly 50% while structured sports time and passive leisure time (TV, video games) have both risen.

Not only are children busier, but families are spending less overall “quality” time together. Conversations between parents and children are all but non-existent.

What are the results: tired children who do not get enough sleep. Busy families who are driven more by activities than values. Disconnected families that do not talk enough or only in the van to and from events. Precious little unstructured time, like a family dinner, to catch up, breathe and share our lives.

So what? Take a hard look at your family routine. Is it overbooked? Are you tired and frantic? Do you believe that your child will actually be better off with more activities? Why not cut back on a few activities and spend some unstructured time with your children. Start by planning some stay at home dinners together. No agenda, just family talk. Just a thought

If you would like more details on the studies I cited, call or email me: 520-721-0800 or info@instepministries.com.