The Importance of Eating Together

Family dinners build relationships, and help kids do better in school.

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After my mother passed away and my brother went to study in New Zealand, the first thing that really felt different was the dinner table. My father and I began eating separately. We went out to dinners with our friends, ate sandwiches in front of our computers, delivery pizzas while watching movies. Some days we rarely saw each other at all. Then, a few weeks before I was set to leave for university, my father walked downstairs. “You know, I think we should start eating together even if it’s just you and me,” he said. “Your mother would have wanted that.” It wasn’t ideal, of course—the meals we made weren’t particularly amazing and we missed the presence of Mom and my brother—but there was something special about setting aside time to be with my father. It was therapeutic: an excuse to talk, to reflect on the day, and on recent events. Our chats about the banal—of baseball and television—often led to discussions of the serious—of politics and death, of memories and loss. Eating together was a small act, and it required very little of us—45 minutes away from our usual, quotidian distractions—and yet it was invariably one of the happiest parts of my day.

Sadly, Americans rarely eat together anymore. In fact, the average American eats one in every five meals in her car, one in four Americans eats at least one fast food meal every single day, and the
majority of American families report eating a single meal together less than five days a week. It’s a pity that so many Americans are missing out on what could be meaningful time with their loved ones, but it’s even more than that. Not eating together also has quantifiable negative effects both physically and psychologically.

Using data from nearly three-quarters of the world’s countries, a new analysis from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that students who do not regularly eat with their parents are significantly more likely to be truant at school. The average truancy rate in the two weeks before the International Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test administered to 15-year-olds by the OECD and used in the analysis as a measure for absenteeism, was about 15 percent throughout the world on average, but it was nearly 30 percent when pupils reported they didn’t often share meals with their families.

How then do we eat better, not just from a nutritional perspective, but from a psychological one as well?

Children who do not eat dinner with their parents at least twice a week also were 40 percent more likely to be overweight compared to those who do, as outlined in a research presentation given at the European Congress on Obesity in Bulgaria this May. On the contrary, children who do eat dinner with their parents five or more days a week have less trouble with drugs and alcohol, eat healthier, show better academic performance, and report being closer with their parents than children who eat dinner with their parents less often, according to a study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

There are two big reasons for these negative effects associated with not eating meals together: the first is simply that when we eat out—especially at the inexpensive fast food and take-out places that most children go to when not eating with their family—we tend not to eat very healthy things. As Michael Pollan wrote in his most recent book, *Cooked*, meals eaten outside of the home are almost uniformly less healthy than homemade foods, generally having higher fat, salt, and caloric content.

The other reason is that eating alone can be alienating. The dinner table can act as a unifier, a place of community. Sharing a meal is an excuse to catch up and talk, one of the few times where people are happy to put aside their work and take time out of their day. After all, it is rare that we Americans grant ourselves pleasure over productivity (just look at the fact that the average American works nearly 220 hours more per year than the average Frenchman).

In many countries, mealtime is treated as sacred. In France, for instance, while it is acceptable to eat by oneself, one should never rush a meal. A frenzied salad muncher on the métro invites dirty glares, and employees are given at least an hour for lunch. In many Mexican cities, townpeople will eat together with friends and family in central areas like parks or town squares. In Cambodia, villagers spread out colorful mats and bring food to share with loved ones like a potluck.
In her book *Eating Together*, Alice Julier argues that dining together can radically shift people's perspectives: It reduces people's perceptions of inequality, and diners tend to view those of different races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds as more equal than they would in other social scenarios.

It hasn’t always been the case that Americans don’t prioritize eating together and eating slowly. In 1950, Elizabeth David, who was recognized as the sort of soul-stirring American culinary evangelist du moment, as perhaps Alice Waters or David Lebovitz is today, published *A Book of Mediterranean Food*. She wrote that great food is simple. She proposed that meals didn’t have to come from fancy or trendy restaurants, and that enjoying basic meals with loved ones makes for the best eating. In one particularly salient passage, she writes:

“In the shade of the lemon grove I break off a bunch of bread, sprinkle it with the delicious fruity olive oil, empty my glass of sour white Capri wine; and remember that Norman Douglas once wrote that whoever has helped us to a larger understanding is entitled to our gratitude for all time.”

Her equation for physical and psychological well-being is easy: Eat simply and eat together.

For the average American family, who now spends nearly as much money on fast food as they do on groceries, this simplicity is not so easily achieved. Perhaps the root of this problem is cultural misperception.

In America, it seems snobbish to take time to eat good food with one’s family. The Norman Rockwell portrait of the family around the dinner table now seems less middle-class and more haute bourgeoisie, as many families can’t afford to have one parent stay home from work, spending his or her day cleaning and cooking a roast and side of potatoes for the spouse and kids. Most parents don’t have time to cook, many don’t even know how, and the idea that one should spend extra money and time picking up produce at the supermarket rather than grabbing a bucket of Chinese take-out can seem unfeasible, unnecessary, and slightly pretentious. It’s understandable to want to save time and money. It’s the same reason that small shops go out of business once Walmart moves into town; but in this case it is not the shop owner who suffers, it is the consumer of unhealthy and rushed meals.