

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Chewing over the benefits of family meals



Matt Bonsall and Stephanie Small of Ottawa sit down for dinner this week with their daughters, Nettie, 7, and Daisy, 10.

Children who eat with their parents have more self-esteem and, some scientists say, better brain development

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As evidence mounts that eating as a family can protect children from all sorts of harm, experts say the bonding and connectedness that comes with regular family meals may positively influence the brain development of kids.

Studies have found that by adolescence, the more often a family eats together the less likely children are to smoke, use alcohol and drugs, suffer from an eating disorder or consider suicide. Family meals have also been linked to higher self-esteem and better performance at school.

There isn't a cause-and-effect relationship. Still, the correlations are strong enough for researchers to say regular family meals offer a protective effect. Now, they want to find out why.

"A lot of kids are not getting the environment their brains require for their development. I am talking the physiology of the brain and connections," says Gabor Maté, a Vancouver physician, and co-author of *Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*, which he wrote with developmental psychologist Gordon Neufeld.

But could regular family meals really affect brain development?

The idea makes sense, says Tomas Paus, a Canadian neuroscientist who is charting the changes that take place in the adolescent brain. He and his colleagues have taken brain scans and interviewed 600 volunteers aged 12 to 18 in the Saguenay region of Quebec.

They found that in adolescent boys, the volume of white matter in their brain increases by 25 per cent over those years. White matter connects different parts of the brain together and the rapid growth appears to be mediated by testosterone.

In girls, the changes are less dramatic, about a 5-per-cent increase in white matter.

The changes bolster the notion that adolescence is a time of integration for the brain. There are also more subtle alterations occurring in the prefrontal cortex, which is involved in impulse control and reasoning.

Dr. Paus and his colleagues are also looking at the impact of "positive youth development" on the brain, assessing what they call the five Cs: connectedness with friends and families, character, caring, competence and confidence.

Family interaction – including time around the dinner table – can help build all five Cs, says Dr. Paus, who will be moving back to Canada from Britain in January to take a position at the University of Toronto.

And it is very likely, he says, that brains of youngsters who rank high in the five Cs will develop in a healthy manner.

“That would also mean potentially less psychiatric problems.”

As schools and extracurricular activities begin in earnest after the summer break, many parents feel stretched, and sometimes guilty if they miss dinner or breakfast, or both. Studies are inconclusive as to whether both parents in a two-parent family should ideally be present, or if it matters that a meal was at a fast-food restaurant and not at home.

Is one meal, for example, more important than another? Does the age of the child factor in?

Jayne Fulkerson, a psychologist at the University of Minnesota, has started an in-depth study monitoring parents eating with their toddlers in an effort to learn more. She says a family meal doesn't have to be a pot roast. Breakfast counts. So do picnics at the soccer pitch, such as the pizza Stephanie Small and Matt Bonsall shared earlier this week with their daughters, Nettie, 7, and Daisy, 10.

The girls had soccer four nights a week all summer, so the Ottawa family had supper together early, at 5:30 p.m. Ms. Small and her husband run their own business, Bonsall Communications, and life can be hectic, especially now that school has started again.

But she says they enjoy eating together, and she and her husband often share both breakfast and supper with their daughters.

“We don't do it because I think it is good for them. We just like to do it,” she says.

In the best instances, family mealtimes offer a brief but consistent check-in during which parents can talk to their adolescents about the decisions they are facing, like what to wear to the dance, how to use spending money, or what topic to choose for a school project. This gives the chance for kids to practice important reasoning skills, says Marla Eisenberg, assistant professor of Adolescent Health and Medicine at the University of Minnesota.

It might be that parents who eat regularly with their children may learn earlier about trouble at school or with friends, Dr. Eisenberg says.

Dr. Eisenberg notes that in the teenage years, kids are developing their capacity for higher-order thinking, decision making and impulse control.

“One thing parents can do to help in this process is allow adolescents the room to ‘practice’ making meaningful decisions – the thinking is that this will help strengthen these neurological pathways earlier.”