Sleep, Family Meals, Family Formation
About the Cover

Country Holiday
Rachelle Heller, 10 years old, Toronto, Ontario
Rachelle is a student at Leo Baeck Day School in Toronto. She enjoys reading, creating art, taking piano lessons and yoga classes, swimming, participating in the local nature club and walking dogs. She is particularly proud of this painting, as it was selected to hang in the school boardroom.

Contribute to Transition
If you would like to submit articles or cover art for the magazine, please read our Contributors’ Guidelines, available under the “Resources” tab at www.vanierinstitute.ca.

Subscribe
Published quarterly since 1970, Transition is widely read and offers a balance of accessible, insightful views and timely information on families and family-related issues. To subscribe and begin receiving Transition at your doorstep or by email, call 613-228-8500 or 1-800-331-4937, ext. 211, or go to www.vanierinstitute.ca (“Resources” tab).

Translation
Sylvain Gagné, Services langagiers

Design and Production
Denyse Marion, RGD, Art & Facts Design Inc.

© 2015 The Vanier Institute of the Family
From the Editor

This year, the Vanier Institute of the Family celebrates its 50th anniversary. In her regular column, CEO Nora Spinks expounds on how the Institute is taking this opportunity to pause and reflect, to respect and celebrate the past, to understand and appreciate the present, and to anticipate and prepare for the future.

Sleep is a family affair, according to Dr. David Posen. In our first feature article, “Sleep and Families,” he looks at the complex relationship between sleeping patterns and family lives. Long working hours, new technologies and a 24/7 culture take a toll on families and family life. Dr. Posen shows how managing sleep to avoid the consequences of deprivation provides individual and collective benefits.

Sara MacNaull reviews Family Futures in “Off the Vanier Bookshelf.” In May 2014, in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development (UNDESA-DSPD) published Family Futures, a diverse collection of writings that focus on the importance of strong families in society and activities across the globe that support and strengthen families.

In our second feature article, Paul Fieldhouse discusses the importance of family meals in “(Still) Eating Together: The Culture of the Family Meal.” Times are changing, and so too are families and household relationships, yet mealtime still provides an opportunity for family members to reconnect with each other. No matter whether it happens at the kitchen table or in the food court at the mall, eating together can strengthen family bonds.

Video game consoles are a fixture in a majority of Canadian households. Add them together with smartphones and personal computers, and it becomes easy to see why video games have exploded in popularity. There is a bright side to this, however, as Nathan Battams reveals in “No Longer Just ‘Child’s Play’: Electronic Gaming in Canada.” Like other recreational activities, video games can provide an opportunity for family members and friends to connect.

Are you seeing more strollers in your neighbourhood? Have you noticed that the local schoolyard looks busier? Check out how many babies were born in Canada in 2011 compared with 2001 in this issue’s Facts and Stats on births, fertility and contraception.

Your suggestions and comments are always welcome. If you have ideas for future issues or would like to submit something you’ve written – including first-hand perspectives on family-related issues or even artwork for the cover – please contact us at editor@vanierinstitute.ca.

Veronica Schami
Editor
Anniversaries are a special time. They are milestones that provide us with an opportunity to pause and reflect, to respect and celebrate the past, to understand and appreciate the present, and to anticipate and prepare for the future. Milestones allow us to look at how far we’ve come, to think about our expectations and aspirations, to assess our current experience and to chart our future.

The Vanier Institute of the Family celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2015. In 1964, Governor General Georges P. Vanier and his wife, Pauline Vanier, convened the Canadian Conference on the Family at Rideau Hall, bringing together academics, social workers, students and medical professionals to mobilize existing knowledge and identify gaps in our collective understanding of families in Canada. From this conference, the Vanier Institute of the Family was created one year later to act as a “Royal Commission that should never be discharged.” Their Excellencies believed families deserved focused attention into the future.

As part of respecting and commemorating the past, the Institute’s Board of Directors held a visioning session in early 2014, in which we modernized our mission, vision and values. In recognition of our 50th anniversary, we commissioned a medallion, designed by Mark Stephens and created by Aitkens Pewter, to be circulated to our partners and contributors.

Throughout 2014 and 2015, we have been engaging people across Canada in conversation about family life in our Families in Canada Listening Tour. At these events, we gather the stories behind the statistics – accounts of family life and family experiences, expectations and aspirations that will guide our future research.

In June, the Families in Canada Conference 2015 will explore our present knowledge of families and family life. As in 1964, a group of researchers, family service professionals, government officials, and labour and faith leaders will focus on enhancing our collective understanding of families in Canada. Finally, in the fall, we will hold a Board of Directors meeting in Quebec City, where Their Excellencies were laid to rest.

This is an exciting time for us – a time to rejuvenate and refresh. We are proud of the work we have done and the legacy that the Vaniers left for us. Our 50th anniversary is a milestone that acts as a tribute to our history and a source of inspiration for the future. Now, it is time for us to envision the next 50 years. We invite everyone with an interest in families and family life to join us as we engage in conversation to understand families in Canada.
Sleep and Families

DR. DAVID B. POSEN, M.D.

Sleep is a family affair. When everyone gets what they need, there are benefits for all. When someone is short-changed, it affects everyone else. Research about sleep deprivation is now as compelling as the dangers of smoking 50 years ago, according to Dr. Charles Czeisler, head of the Division of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School, yet many households in Canada are lacking in this vital family resource. This shortage – fuelled by long working hours, new technologies and a 24/7 culture – not only affects productivity at work, performance at school and overall health, but also has a profound effect on families and family life.

What does sleep do for us?

Sleep has many different functions. Sleep is when we restore our physical energy. It’s a time of deep rest and healing, like a “mini- hibernation.” Stress hormones are shut off, heart rate decreases, blood pressure drops, metabolism rate slows and core body temperature falls. It’s when growth hormones are secreted, important for growing children but also contributing to cell repair and replacement in adults. It’s when our immune system is most active, producing T-lymphocytes that fight infection. It’s when hormones affecting hunger and satiety (leptin and ghrelin) are secreted, affecting appetite, food intake and body weight.

Sleep isn’t just important for our bodies, but our minds as well, since it affects mental function. This is when we do our “mental housekeeping,” processing and organizing our previous day’s experiences while discarding irrelevant information (such as what colour sweater someone was wearing on the subway). It is also when we reinforce memory tracks and consolidate new learning. In fact, research shows we actually increase our learning when we sleep. Symptoms of sleep deprivation are also symptoms of stress. In other words, sleep deprivation shows up in our bodies as stress, in terms of physiological symptoms. When we don’t get enough sleep, cortisol (the main hormone in chronic stress) stays higher longer and has a damaging effect on the body. When we are sleep-deprived, we are less resilient in dealing with stressful situations, less effective problem solvers, less creative and innovative, less affable and can become difficult to get along with.
How sleep (and lack of sleep) affects families

Our sleeping patterns and family lives share a complex relationship, and deprivation affects not just individuals, but families and family systems as well. To examine the impact, let’s first look at cohabiting couples. This usually involves sleeping together, which leads to a number of interesting dynamics that can affect the quantity and quality of sleep a couple receives. When two people share a bed, there are important factors that can affect their sleep that have to be negotiated (or agreed upon), such as the size of their bed, the firmness of their mattress, the temperature of their bedroom and the presence of electronics. Research has shown that light emitted from TVs, smartphones, tablets or light-emitting e-readers can interfere with a good night’s rest.2, 3

The time at which one partner goes to sleep or wakes up in the morning can affect the other partner. If a couple has incompatible schedules, both of their sleeping patterns can be negatively affected by the actions and routines of each other. One person may stay up later than they would like because their partner wants to spend more time with them – thus depriving themselves of sleep. Discussion between sleeping partners is crucial to both getting their required amount of sleep. The decisions and agreements made not only affect whether each partner is getting the sleep that they individually need, but also represent negotiations that can either cause conflict in a relationship or provide opportunities for consideration, respect and compromise.

These are the conscious decisions affecting the bedroom and sleep. But there are involuntary factors as well. One of the biggest disrupters of sleep is a noisy or restless bed partner. The most common issues are snoring and frequent movement in bed. There are many causes of snoring, some mechanical (e.g., sleeping position) and others physiological (e.g., enlarged tonsils and adenoids, large uvula). What’s fascinating is that some snoring can actually reach industrial-strength decibel levels, rattling windows and even disturbing sleepers in other bedrooms – and yet the snorer sleeps through the racket.

Two of the most common sleep disorders are obstructive sleep apnea and restless legs syndrome. With sleep apnea, one of the partners actually stops breathing many times during the night (in fact, many times an hour), often startling themselves awake in order to breathe. Restless legs syndrome causes people to feel discomfort in their legs that is relieved only by continually moving them around, which again can be quite disruptive to the other person in the bed. If this occurs later in life, some couples may decide to move to separate beds or bedrooms to manage their sleep.

A new parent’s life is full of obstacles to sleep

For couples who decide to have children, a whole new variety of factors are brought into the household that affect sleeping patterns and sleep management. This begins with pregnancy. Expectant mothers often have trouble sleeping due to the increasing size of the fetus,
the ability to feel the baby moving and increased trips to the bathroom at night. After the baby arrives, disrupted sleep becomes the norm. Babies cry to communicate when they’re hungry, in need of a diaper change or needing to be settled. This can be disruptive to both the new mother (especially if she is breastfeeding) and her partner. This is always a challenging time for getting enough rest, which means it’s an important time for negotiation.

As children get older (around 3 or 4 years of age), they are able to get up and dressed by themselves. Decisions have to be made as to whether a parent gets up with them or whether they train their kids to go to the family room or basement and entertain themselves so their parents can remain in bed. Many parents create a dependency where children expect company and attention from the time they wake up, robbing one or both parents of the extra sleep they need.

Teenagers have a physiological need for more slumber

The next chapter in the parents’ sleep continuum is when children reach early adolescence. This is when something called “phase-shift delay” occurs, where teenagers start to stay up later and then can’t wake up in the morning – a process often misunderstood by parents. Parents often complain that their children are party animals at night (when they won’t go to bed) and then lazy slugs in the morning (when they can’t, or won’t, get up for school). In fact, there’s a biological basis for this. In adults, cortisol levels start to fall at about 10 p.m. and the sleep hormone melatonin is secreted. That’s when we fall asleep. Then, somewhere between 6 and 8 a.m., melatonin secretion stops and we get a surge of cortisol. This allows us to wake up and start our day.

Among teenagers, this whole process is delayed by one or two hours. Cortisol doesn’t shut off and melatonin doesn’t kick in until later in the evening, and the reverse process doesn’t occur until an hour or two later in the morning. Adolescents stay up late because they are not tired yet – it’s physiological. If they don’t wake up in the morning at the same time they used to, it’s likely because their brains are still in “sleep mode” for an extra hour or two. So when they won’t wake up, it’s because they can’t wake up – except with great difficulty.

Many jurisdictions have moved high school start times to 9 a.m. or even 10 a.m., which is a better biological fit for teenagers. These districts have noticed better attendance at school, improved academic performance and fewer behavioural problems when students are allowed to get the sleep they need in the time frame that corresponds to their physiology. There are also benefits to families from this rescheduling of school hours, as it can reduce morning conflict involved with getting kids up and improve mood and cooperation at home because teens are better rested.

Teenagers often face a clash between their physiological and academic needs. One issue is accomplishing late-night homework and studying for...
exams. Teenagers are often sleep-deprived (they need nine to 10 hours a night and most are lucky if they get seven), and when you add to that the tendency to stay up well past midnight, finishing assignments or cramming for exams, the problem can become magnified considerably. The more tired they are, the less well they perform on the very tests they stayed up late to study for. Teenagers who also work part-time jobs while going to school face additional challenges, since they must balance school and work with their relatively demanding sleep requirements.

Dr. Stanley Coren, a psychologist at UBC in Vancouver, did a meta-analysis on the effect of sleep deprivation on IQ scores. The results were quite startling. In a newspaper interview, Dr. Coren states that "one hour’s lost sleep out of eight results in a drop of one point of IQ and for every additional hour lost, you drop two points. And it accumulates. So if you cheat on sleep by two hours a night over a five day week, you’ve lost 15 points."4

Functional MRIs show the same thing. With sleep deprivation, electrical activity in the brain decreases. For students who pull all-nighters, by late afternoon the next day, their mental function is significantly impaired and their performance plummets. Even the next morning, their cognitive function is seriously compromised.

**Shiftwork creates irregular sleep requirements**

Another factor that can have an impact on sleep within families is shift work. I was a family doctor for 17 years, which involved being on call at least once a week, working nights in the ER and being available to deliver babies after midnight. This often involved the phone ringing or my pager going off in the middle of the night, which was disruptive to my wife. The same scenario plays out in families of anyone who has to be available for overnight emergencies – doctors, operating room nurses, hospital technicians, security people or even business owners when there is a security breach at night.

It also affects people who are regular shift workers, such as police, firefighters, ambulance drivers, paramedics, security guards, factory workers and office cleaners. People who work an overnight shift are actually working against their own physiology. They are being required to be awake at the time when their bodies and brains are biologically programmed for sleeping. After their shift, they go home to try to get some sleep. This has an effect on everyone in the family, who are then required to maintain as quiet a home environment as possible. This includes everything from limiting or abstaining from radio and TV, phone conversations to spending time indoors with their friends. Any kind of noise might disrupt the sleeping family member who is in desperate need of sleep during the day, when that person’s body is programmed to be awake. The need for other family members to accommodate the irregular sleep requirements of shift work can cause friction, and so discussion, explanation and negotiation are very important.
Sleep requirements change as we age because our bodies change

At the other end of the life-cycle spectrum are circumstances such as menopause for women, where sleep deprivation can be a result of hot flashes or night sweats. As men get older, prostate enlargement often leads to frequent trips to the bathroom at night. People often find it hard to get back to sleep. Many disabilities, which become more prevalent with age, can also affect our sleep, such as shortness of breath due to lung or heart conditions, as well as aches and pains from arthritis, injuries or other musculoskeletal conditions.

Sleep disorders can affect us more as we age. Obstructive sleep apnea becomes more common, especially if a person has gained weight. This is a very underdiagnosed and undertreated condition where sleep deprivation takes a toll. Even though people with sleep apnea may be getting the requisite number of hours in bed and asleep, they are getting the quantity but not the quality of sleep they need. Incidentally, this is where a family member may be an asset: the sleep apnea is often first identified by the partner, not by the patient.

Sleep is a family affair

Sleep is one of the three basic pillars of good health, along with nutrition and exercise. From the start of a live-in relationship to the later stages of our lives, it affects members of every family, both individually and collectively. Awareness of our requirements, and those of other family members, is key to managing our sleep and avoiding the consequences of deprivation. We need to understand sleep so we can talk about and act upon it with serious consideration. Sleep really is a family affair with widespread effects on our physical and mental well-being, and sleep management provides us with opportunities to strengthen our family relationships by being helpful, respectful, understanding and considerate of one another.

Dr. David Posen is a bestselling author (Always Change a Losing Game: Winning Strategies for Work, Home and Health and The Little Book of Stress Relief), international keynote speaker and seminar leader who specializes in stress and change management. His latest book, *Is Work Killing You?*, explores the relationship between work and well-being.

---

In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed that year as International Year of the Family (IYF) – an observance dedicated to families, which were seen as the “basic unit of society” warranting special attention. This year provided an opportunity for citizens, governments and civil society organizations to recognize and celebrate the role that families play in the development and well-being of individuals and the societies in which they live. In May 2014, as part of the 20th anniversary celebrations for IYF, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development (UNDESA-DSPD) published *Family Futures* – a book focusing on the importance of strong families in society and activities across the globe that support and strengthen families.

In her foreword to the book, Amina J. Mohammed, Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General on Post-2015 Development Planning, emphasizes that as the “basic economic unit in every society,” families are key to global efforts to address poverty and develop economies. The book’s chapters consist of contributions from heads of state, national government ministers, academics and civil society representatives – including the Vanier Institute of the Family. Each chapter covers three main development themes: advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity within families and communities, confronting family poverty and social exclusion, and ensuring work–family balance.

*Family Futures* is a highly diverse collection of writings. Some describe the rationales for focusing on the family in terms of development goals, such as the impact that intergenerational solidarity and family poverty can have on societal well-being. Others focus on the issues faced by families from particular countries and cultures and how these differing contexts can shape their experiences. Finally, some contributions provide an introduction to specific programs, policies and initiatives that have been designed to facilitate family living over the years.

Despite the diversity of the book’s contributors, the variety of countries being discussed and the range of policies and programs being described in its chapters, *Family Futures* speaks to common themes in family life.

Regardless of their origin, families across the globe are bound by ties of care and support. Families seek stability and work to achieve well-being for themselves and the communities in which they live. Families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic and cultural forces – and these same forces are affected by the decisions these families make. The contexts in which families live may vary substantially, but the overall function and importance of family is common around the world.

*Family Futures*, like the International Year of the Family itself, provides an opportunity to learn about and reflect on the importance of families to us as individuals, as nations and as a global society. Studying the cultural context in which families live helps us to understand their individual and collective life, experiences, expectations and aspirations. *Family Futures* enhances our understanding by applying an international lens, demonstrating the significance of families to social and economic development.

Sara MacNaull is responsible for Networks, Projects and Special Events at the Vanier Institute of the Family.

The Vanier Institute of the Family

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

(Still) Eating Together

The Culture of the Family Meal

PAUL FIELDHOUSE

For most Canadians, eating is a daily event so routine, so ordinary that it is taken for granted. But it is also a central part of social relationships and cultural rituals, as well as a symbolic and a material means of coming together. Across cultures and time, food sharing is an almost universal medium for expressing fellowship; it embodies values of hospitality, duty, gratitude, sacrifice and compassion. The shared meal is an opportunity not only to eat, but also to talk, to create and strengthen bonds of attachment and friendship, to teach and learn. Not surprisingly, the family meal is often celebrated as a supremely important component of family life.
The modern family meal

In order to understand “family meals,” it is important to first clarify what the term means. The phrase seems simple enough, but upon examination, the notion of the “family meal” is revealed as convenient shorthand for an idea that may be more imagined than real. A common image that might come to mind is a happy nuclear family of mom, dad and kids sitting around a nicely laid table enjoying the fruits (and other products) of a largely invisible kitchen production process. Certainly this is an image perpetuated, if not created, by mid-20th-century advertising and popular TV and magazine culture. It has firmly established itself as a cultural ideal, something to be aspired to and emulated – the ultimate symbol of perfect family unity and stability.

It doesn’t take much of a historical read to see that this nuclear concept of the family meal is a fairly modern phenomenon. In Victorian Britain, the children of aristocratic and wealthy families were more likely to eat in the nursery or kitchen with their nanny or the servants, or to eat in communal dining rooms at boarding schools, than to sit at the “family table.” In low-income households, there might not even be a table to sit around. In North America, “proper” family mealtimes became part of the middle-class consciousness during the second half of the 19th century. During the economic growth and prosperity of the post-war years, the “traditional” idea of the family meal became, perhaps briefly, the norm across social classes.

There are, of course, many types of families and household relationships. What does this mean then for what can be considered a family meal? Does everyone in the family have to be present? Do they have to be eating the same foods? Do they have to be sitting around a table? Does the food have to be prepared from scratch, or at least in the home? Does everyone have to be part of the same household? What if friends or visitors are present – is it still a family meal? Some attempts to define a family meal include formulas such as at least one adult and one child eating together, two or more people eating together, or members of the same household eating together. Each of these definitions may be necessary but not sufficient to define the family meal and, without common definitions, assessing how common family meals are – and if and how they are changing – becomes very difficult.

The rhythm and role of the family meal

As an everyday ritual, the family meal can be seen as a symbol of shared family life. It organizes the family, regularly bringing family members together and contributing to their physical, mental and social well-being. It provides a rhythm and predictable structure to the day, which can be psychologically reassuring. On the physical or biological level, it is a way to manage the nutritional needs of family members. The extent to which it is successful in so doing depends on a large number of factors, including access to affordable and nutritious food, nutritional knowledge, and food-buying and food preparation skills.

The appearance of a meal on the family table represents the outcome of time-consuming and skilled activities that involve both mental decision making and physical work. This work of “deciding and doing,” which applies to all steps of getting a meal, from planning menus to shopping, preparation and serving, is largely invisible and taken for granted. While this work is still predominantly performed by women, men are increasingly taking on a larger role in family meal preparation than in the past. Cooking a family meal can
be an enjoyable and fulfilling task, but it also demands trade-offs in time, money and emotional capital.

With all the work involved, the provision of a family meal is a symbolic demonstration of the care of the meal provider. It may veer more toward love or toward duty, but it always shows commitment to the family group. By sharing meal-related tasks, from shopping to food preparation, table-laying and clearing-up, all family members can participate in this exercise of responsible family solidarity. Failure to do so may be a source of family tension. On the other hand, research has shown that being unable to regularly produce the idealized family meal may provoke feelings of inadequacy and frustration.

Children and teens benefit from family meals

The dinner table is an important place for the socialization of children. The family meal is a prime setting for their introduction to the rules and norms of accepted behaviour and family values and expectations. For toddlers and preschoolers, it teaches what is considered culturally acceptable food and, on a more basic level, what is considered food and non-food. From a nutritional perspective, family meals provide opportunities for exposing children to a variety of healthy food choices and for modelling healthy eating behaviours, encouraging new tastes and learning to respect appetite as a guide to satiety. But just as healthy choices can be modelled, so can unhealthy ones. If the typical family meal consists of starchy, fatty or high sugar items, with fruit and vegetables making rare appearances, then this pattern will be learned and likely continued.

At family mealtimes, children learn developmental skills, such as holding a cup or manipulating chopsticks, and acquire and develop language and literacy skills through the flow of conversation. For young children especially, “table talk” may be the main source of exposure to family conversation and the expression of thoughts, ideas and emotions. Through the exchange of stories, anecdotes and news, children learn about the adult world and the interests and attitudes of their parents, while adults get to learn about the interests and attitudes of their children’s world. At family mealtimes, parents know where their kids are; they can gauge their moods and needs, and uncover and help solve problems.

Research has also suggested that the family meal has a “protective effect.” Children and adolescents who eat more frequently with the family may consume better quality diets and are less likely to be overweight. They have fewer emotional problems and greater academic achievement, and they may be less likely to adopt risky behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse. It is not clear what it is about the family meal that is protective. Furthermore, it is difficult to isolate family mealtimes from other familial influences. A recent study by two U.S. sociologists suggests that most of the associations between family meals and positive outcomes for youth can be traced to family socio-economic characteristics that make it more likely that they will actually have family meals.

Family meals are changing as families change

Throughout history, the family meal has come to represent the family itself in the public mind, and there is evidence that every generation has lamented its demise. Even in the 1920s, worries were being expressed about how leisure activities and the rise of the car were undermining family mealtimes! Sociologist Anne Murcott has suggested that the

Instead of mourning the demise of the family meal, we can look for ways to reinvigorate our relationship with food and thus with our families, friends and wider community through intentionally eating together.
“ideal” is closest to reality among middle-class families, the group that is most anxious about its perceived loss. The family meal represents stability during times of change. The lament for the lost family meal may actually be a reaction to perceived or feared change in family structures and arrangements.

Market research survey polls provide wildly varying data on family meals, making it difficult to draw reliable conclusions. For example, in 2013 a commercial market research company provided a report to their clients that showed eight out of 10 Canadians families had a family meal at least four times a week. In Quebec, this was nine out of 10. In a survey performed for a different client in 2014, the same company reported that only two out of 10 families eat family meals more than twice a week and that 5% of families never had family meals.

While market research data may be contradictory, academic studies and government data on family meals are relatively scarce. Evidence from the U.S., the U.K. and Scandinavia has pointed to family meals happening about half the time. U.S. data for 2003–2013 from the Child Trends Data Bank showed little change in frequency of family meals reported by children, which for six to seven days a week remained at around 55% for 6- to 11-year-olds and 30% for 12- to 17-year-olds. A 2010 U.K. survey suggested that 25% of families ate together nearly every day, while one in 10 families never had an evening meal together and one in five spent less than 10 minutes at the table together.

Canadian data for the period 1996–2005 showed that workers were spending less time on family activities, including family meals, and were more likely to eat at least one meal alone. The 2010 General Social Survey conducted by Statistics Canada reported that Canadians spent about one-quarter of their waking hours on food-related activities (eating meals at home or at restaurants as well as cooking/washing up), of which 60–70 minutes was devoted to eating meals in the home, with younger people spending the least amount of time on this activity. Another consumer report in 2011 claimed that 55% of Canadians spent 15 minutes or less on preparing a meal.

While this data suggests that time for family meals has diminished, it doesn’t indicate directly whether the number and type of family meals are changing. However, demographic changes in living arrangements are likely to have an impact. In 2011, according to the Canada census, one-person households made up 27.6% of all homes, a threefold increase since 1961 that is especially notable in Quebec. It is little wonder then that eating alone is becoming common. Recent U.S. polling data suggests that even outside of the home, six out of 10 meals are eaten alone.

What does seem to hold true is that the majority of people still want and value family meals, however they define them. In the U.K. study mentioned above, three-quarters of people wanted to make more effort to sit down together for a family meal. At the same time, many people admit to facing a multitude of barriers in putting this into practice. Lack of time, work demands, busy social lives, scheduled activities – especially after-school activities for children – and increased opportunities for eating away from home are among the factors militating against the family meal. Lunch has largely disappeared as a family meal, and breakfast may not be far behind as parents report a lack of time to prepare breakfast for their children before school.

A 2012 workplace consultant report revealed that three in 10 workers don’t take lunch breaks and four in 10 eat alone at their desks. The picture is quite
different in France, where the ritual of the shared meal is still a core element of collective everyday life, and in Italy, where three-quarters of the population sit down to lunch in their own homes. Whereas snacks and mealtimes are spread throughout the day in North America, in France there are three big spikes at morning, noon and night, indicating that traditional meal patterns are strong. At 1 p.m., almost half the French are sitting down to lunch; at 8:15 p.m., more than one-third are having supper. Whether it is a family meal or a meal shared with friends or co-workers, 80% of meals are eaten in the company of others.

Statistics about family meals don’t describe anything about the nature and quality of those events. It is evident that eating patterns are changing in response to changing societal arrangements, including work roles and technology. The concept of set mealtimes to be eaten in the company of specified family members, such as the “three meals a day” pattern familiar to many older people – particularly of European heritage – has largely given way to a less structured, more ad hoc system, aptly described as “grazing.” At the same time as there are increasing barriers to sit-down, at-home, all-family-members-together meals, food is increasingly available, especially in urban centres, on a 24/7 basis outside the home at restaurants, malls, drive-ins and even non-food outlets, such as big box stores and garden centres. People are more inclined to eat when and where they want to in more informal and unstructured ways.

Future of the family meal

Families may still eat together – though this is often at malls, in fast-food restaurants or in cars en route to the basketball game or dance rehearsal – but to what extent do these constitute family meals? The common elements of food and family are still there, but what may be missing are some of the symbolic and culturally meaningful dimensions of the home-based family meal, some of the cultural learning opportunities and the structure that family mealtimes can bring to the day. When eating in the family car, for example, a parent may not be able to demonstrate the loving and responsible role of provider in the same way, it could be harder for them to teach food manners while in motion and this setting may not invoke the same sense of a refuge from the public sphere or reminder of family unity. Even here, though, care must be taken when making assumptions. Is it not possible to have a conversation about one’s day or to enquire about homework while on the road or sitting around the fast-food restaurant table? Some critics have doubted this, yet other studies suggest that when families eat out, they behave in ways very similar to home.

Eating together, whatever and wherever that may be, can help build and strengthen bonds between family members. Perhaps instead of mourning the demise of the family meal, we can look for ways to reinvigorate our relationship with food and thus with our families, friends and wider community through intentionally eating together. We can take what we believe is good about family meals and put it into practice every time we eat. We can re-envisage mealtimes as a time for conviviality and social bonding. Forsaking the lonely desk lunch and the solo car meal, we can seek out company to share food and community.

This article is a revised and updated reprint of Eating Together: The Culture of the Family Meal, originally published in Transition in December 2007.

Paul Fieldhouse is an adjunct professor in the Department of Human Nutritional Sciences at the University of Manitoba and a nutrition policy and research consultant for the Manitoba government. He has an Interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Food and Religion.
Ever since Pac-Man and PONG began filling arcades with eager players decades ago, video games have exploded in popularity and have become a common form of recreation in Canada. Fuelled by the spread of personal computers and gaming consoles, the electronic game industry is now big business, generating $2.3 billion to Canada’s GDP in 2012 alone – the third-largest video game industry in the world.¹

Canadians are surrounded by a range of devices and platforms that support electronic gaming. More than six in 10 (62%) Canadians surveyed in 2014 reported having at least one video game console in their household.² Electronic games are more common than ever due to the proliferation of smartphones (owned by 62% of surveyed Canadians),³ which allow people of all ages to play games with each other regardless of location. Personal computers are the most prevalent of all, owned by 85% of surveyed Canadian households.⁴

Once considered “child’s play,” Canadians of all ages now play video games on a regular basis: in a 2014 survey, 54% of Canadians reported having played a computer or video game in the past month and the average age of people who reported playing video games was 33 years.⁵ Recent data from Statistics Canada also show that “gamers” can be found in all age groups: 57% of 16- to 24-year-olds, 36% of 25- to 44-year-olds, 25% of 45- to 64-year-olds and 27% of online Canadians aged 65 and older reported using the Internet to play games in 2012.⁶

Data from the 2010 General Social Survey on time use in Canada indicated that among those who reported playing video games, the average time spent on this activity was 2 hours 20 minutes per day – up from 1 hour 48 minutes in 1998.⁷ Younger Canadians are more likely than their older counterparts to play frequently, particularly among the male population. In 2011, nearly one-quarter (23%) of surveyed students in grades 7-12 reported playing video games “daily or almost daily” – but the proportion was much higher among boys (37%) than girls (9%). However, not all youth are interested: in the same survey, 10% said that they “do not play video games.”⁸

There has been some debate over the relationship between video games and health. Most electronic gaming is a form of sedentary behaviour, which is associated with a range of deleterious physical health outcomes.⁹ However, some modern consoles (e.g. Nintendo Wii and Xbox Kinect) do incorporate physical activity in the gameplay. Some are even being used by doctors and organizations to help improve motor function in patients who are recovering from stroke.¹⁰

Like any other recreational activity, video games can provide an opportunity for family members and friends to connect.
There’s no denying the increasing popularity of video games among Canadians of all ages, particularly as the stigma associated with being a “video gamer” beyond youth continues to erode. Since not all video games are sedentary, they can in some cases be used to encourage physical activity – but video games that incorporate physical activity are a relatively recent innovation, and time will tell whether this is a passing novelty or permanent feature of electronic gaming. Like any other recreational activity, video games can provide an opportunity for family members and friends to connect. Many modern video games can be played online, allowing people living far apart to play together in ways that weren’t possible in the past. With the continued growth in the prevalence of devices and platforms that support electronic gaming, the popularity of video games will undoubtedly persist as a recreational activity among Canadians.

Nathan Battams is a writer and researcher at the Vanier Institute of the Family.

---

4 NPD Group.
5 Ibid.
Births, Fertility and Contraception in Canada

377,636 Number of births in Canada in 2011 – up by 13% from 2001

3.94 & 1.61 Average number of children per woman in Canada in 1959 and 2011, respectively

23.6 & 28.5 Average age of first-time mothers in 1961 and 2011, respectively

91%, 77% & 53% Estimated proportion of women who can get pregnant at age 30, by age 35 and by age 40, respectively

14.9 & 11.0 Birth rate per 1,000 among women in Canada in 1981 and 2011, respectively

24.9 & 8.7 Birth rate per 1,000 among women in Nunavut and Newfoundland/Labrador, respectively, in 2011

13,106 & 10 Fertility rate per 1,000 among women in Canada aged 15–19, 30–34 and 40–44, respectively, in 2011

6.1 & 10.3 Fertility rate per 1,000 among women in Canada aged 40–44 in 2001 and 2011, respectively

25% & 29% Proportion of babies born to mothers who were single/never married in 1991 and 2011, respectively

1 in 6 Estimated proportion of couples in Canada that experience infertility

56% & 38% Proportion of Canadians who report that they are and aren’t using contraceptive methods to prevent pregnancy, respectively, in 2011

---

1 Anne Milan, “Number of Births, Canada, 1926 to 2011” (Figure 1), Fertility: Overview, 2009 to 2011, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 91-209-X (July 2013), accessed August 6, 2014, http://bit.ly/1kHXrjU.


6 Ibid.


10 Government of Canada.

Get Informed, Inspired and Involved

Follow us on Twitter: @VanierInstitute
Like us on Facebook: Vanier Institute
Join a network: networks@vanierinstitute.ca
Establish your own Family Legacy Fund: ceo@vanierinstitute.ca
Submit an article for consideration: editor@vanierinstitute.ca
Attend a round table: projects-events@vanierinstitute.ca
Download reports/research: www.vanierinstitute.ca
Subscribe to Transition magazine: www.vanierinstitute.ca
Sign up for our newsletter: www.vanierinstitute.ca
Make a donation: www.vanierinstitute.ca
Share ideas/thoughts/suggestions: ceo@vanierinstitute.ca
The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada.

The Vanier Institute of the Family  
94 Centrepont Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1  
Canada  
Tel.: 613-228-8500  
Fax: 613-228-8007  
Toll-free: 1-800-331-4937  
info@vanierinstitute.ca  
www.vanierinstitute.ca