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(Still) Eating Together

The Culture of the Family Meal

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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.

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The lament for the lost family meal may actually be a reaction to perceived or feared change in family structures and arrangements.

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 mealtime 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

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"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

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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.

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

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